

By Fairbanks Christmas Bird Count Coordinator Laurel Devaney

Arctic Audubon Society's Christmas Bird Count was held on December 16, 2023. This is National Audubon Society's 124th year conducting the oldest citizen science project in North America, and the 63rd year that Fairbanks has participated. As climate change effects are intensified in the far north, the CBC is an important way to track changes in our local bird populations.

Fortunately, our first cold snap of the season passed in time for the count. Temperatures above zero, no wind and lack of falling snow made conditions ideal for counting birds in the short December daylight. Over 43 teams covered the 15 mile diameter count circle in cars and snow machines, walking, snow shoeing and skiing. Another 35 parties counted the birds coming into their feeders.

A respectable total of 32 bird species were counted for the CBC with an additional 1 species recorded during count week (the 3 days prior to and following the CBC). This is the highest count since at least 2013. The total birds seen this year stands at 7,282. This number varies widely each year from a high of over 15,000 to a low of around 3,000. This difference is due almost entirely to two species- common redpolls and white-winged crossbills. These birds range widely all across the boreal forest from year to year seeking areas with abundant spruce cone crops. During the poor cone crop in 2019, only 39 redpolls were counted for the entire Fairbanks CBC area compared to over 8,600 recorded the following year.

Every CBC has some interesting finds and notable misses. A Townsend's solitaire and a varied thrush were seen just before count week began, but not recorded for the CBC, and may not have survived -20 degree temperatures. Willow ptarmigan haven't been recorded for the CBC since at least 2013, but a total of 6 were found by counters in Ester, Goldstream, the University area, and on Creamer's Field. Snow Buntings normally winter far south of Alaska, but 2 hardy stragglers were found at Creamers Field during count week. Two northern shrikes were counted in the Chena ridge and University areas, and one each brown creeper and three-toed woodpecker were located.

The Chena River yielded some surprises as well. A single female northern pintail and a cackling goose were found tucked in among the scrum of more than 350 mallards wintering in the open water behind the Carlson Center. While cackling geese are a common sight in Fairbanks during migration, this is the first ever recorded wintering here.

Perhaps the biggest surprise of all was found at the Fairbanks landfill. Retired USFWS biologist, Ted Swem, counts there every year primarily to get an accurate count of the common ravens in the area. Small numbers of bald eagles have also been recorded hunting the ducks in the Chena and feeding at the landfill since 2020. This year, an astounding 27 bald eagles were counted at the landfill and surrounding area.

Arctic Audubon would like to thank all the hardy individuals who helped make the 2023 CBC a huge success. Plan to join us next year!