

Submission to the Ann Arbor News “Your World” column for 12-26-05:

For the past 106 years the National Audubon Society has sponsored a “Christmas Bird Count” (CBC), carried out by local chapters during the holiday season. The Ann Arbor chapter’s count—in its 59th year—was held on December 18th.

The census started in 1900 as an alternative to an annual Christmas Day bird hunting competition. Because the CBC is held at a time of year when many birds are not in the area, and its study methods are informal (you needn't be a trained birder to participate), it is not often used as a scientific instrument. But it has become a holiday tradition which enjoys wide participation: over 50,000 people annually contribute to this "citizen science" in action project. It has grown into the longest-running database in ornithology, and therein lies its value: the data is a goldmine of information about population trends over time.

Birds are essential to the health and functioning of ecosystems. For instance, a pair of nesting warblers and their brood may consume more than 2,000 caterpillars a day, and some studies have shown that without the songbirds, entire forests would lose their leaves due to insect damage.

The CBC can assist in conservation efforts by pointing to areas of concern that merit more attention, e.g. a decrease in local bird populations can signal an environmental threat, such as groundwater contamination or poisoning from improper use of pesticides.

The CBC census results have been affected by changes due to development. Many species can't adapt to a loss of habitat—which is the primary reason that nearly a third of North America's bird species are in trouble. But other more adaptable species, such as the non-native House Sparrows and European starlings, have proliferated exponentially, further threatening our native species.

On the “Historical Results” page of the Audubon Society CBC website (www.audubon.org/bird/cbc) is a fantastic resource for exploring the CBC’s data: you can make maps of bird distributions, construct graphs of species trends over time, or see the raw count data. This webpage is also the place to find out how to help out with next year’s count.

Another impact on bird populations is caused by cats (see <http://www.audubon.org/bird/cat/>). The “Cats Indoors!” campaign advocates keeping cats inside for their own safety, and because even well-fed cats will follow their instincts and kill birds—including cats with bells on their collars.

Because unwanted, feral cats lead miserable lives and do such damage to wildlife, the Humane Society encourages owners to spay or neuter their cats. The Huron Valley Humane Society (734-662-4365) offers a “frequent feral” program for people managing feral cat colonies: after five cats have been sterilized, the sixth cat will be fixed for free.

To increase bird populations around your home, feed them consistently, year-round.
They especially depend on a reliable supply of food during their spring nesting season.

Submitted by,

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