

Green Scene: Counting Birds

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Green-winged Teal (male and female) along with killdeer are among the birds expected to be seen at the Shoreline Park in Port Moody during the [Christmas Bird Count](#). *Bruce Brandhorst photo.*

You might see some people in local parks this weekend scanning the trees with binoculars as part of the annual Christmas Bird Count. This year will be the 20th year this event has been held in the Tri-Cities area. The Christmas Bird Count, now conducted throughout the Western hemisphere, has been happening for much longer. Started in 1900 by an American ornithologist who wished for a more productive activity than the traditional Christmas Day side hunt, the Christmas Bird Count event has now grown to include thousands of volunteers in many countries.

The side hunt was a shooting contest in which two teams undertook to shoot as many birds as they could on Christmas Day. The winners of this bizarre contest were the ones who ended up with the biggest pile of dead birds; the losers, of course, included all the birds. Thankfully, an ornithologist named Frank Chapman proposed that counting and identifying live birds would be a much more sensible activity. His event spread rapidly in popularity. These days, the count can take place on any day within a three week period around Christmas. It has become a pleasant opportunity to socialize with others while being outdoors collecting useful information about bird populations.

People form into teams that monitor specified sites within a so-called count circle which is 24 kilometers in diameter. Once the count circle is established, it never changes so that data can be compared from one year to the next. The centre of the count circle for our area is Sheridan Hill in Pitt Meadows. This means that, while most areas of the Tri-Cities are included, some areas, such as Como Lake, fall outside of the official count circle. In Pitt Meadows, the Alouette Field Naturalists will organize their count on the same day in Pitt Meadows and Maple Ridge within the same count circle. Elsewhere around the lower mainland, counts are conducted on other days in places such as White Rock, Vancouver, Ladner, Chilliwack, Abbotsford, and Squamish. Some especially dedicated volunteers participate in several of these counts. Despite the fact that varying weather conditions can affect the number of birds seen in a given year, over time, the data collected forms an invaluable record of the species of birds observed and their relative abundance.

Of course, this time of year, many nesting song birds have migrated south for the winter so the forests are, in general, more quiet than during the busy breeding season. However, some of the birds observed this time of year are not found locally during the summer. One of these is the varied thrush which breeds in forested areas at slightly higher elevations in the mountains. Varied thrushes, similar to robins to which they are closely related, forage for food on the forest floor.

Varied Thrushes appear in our area when snow at higher elevations prevents them from finding food. Rob Bertrand photo.

When fall arrives, these birds descend to sea level where the ground is more likely to remain bare and insects are easier to find amongst the fallen leaves. Other birds that undergo similar altitudinal migrations include dippers and juncos. While some juncos have now acquired the habit of staying here year-round to take advantage of backyard feeders, most of them still retreat to higher elevations during the nesting season. Similarly, dippers, which feed on stream insects by diving underwater, typically nest at higher elevations on creeks but follow these creeks downstream to sea level where the water is less likely to freeze during the winter.



The most spectacular additions to local bird life in winter are the many colourful ducks such as buffleheads, goldeneyes and mergansers which fly in from all over BC and Alberta to take advantage of the open water along our coast. Some birds, including snow geese and snowy owls as well as shorebirds such as dunlin breed in the high arctic; for them, the lower mainland is often as far south as they need to fly to find sustenance throughout the winter months.

It's an enjoyable activity to be being outdoors with enthusiastic and knowledgeable birders. It is also good to know the data collected is useful for assessing bird populations. The abundance of birds and their species composition can be a good indicator of ecosystem health. For me, being in a neighborhood park alive with the twitter of kinglets and bushtits and the tap-tap of woodpeckers is the perfect place to be while I anticipate the busy festive holiday season just ahead. Merry Christmas everyone!