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Audubon Society's Christmas Bird Count begins

By KATE SPINNER, kspinner@bonitanews.com
December 20, 2005

Twittering, tweeting and pishing filled the air Monday morning at Lakes Park in Fort Myers and the sounds weren't all coming from the birds.

Vincent McGrath, a birder since childhood, speaks the avian language. His ears perk up at the slightest peep. "Listen," he tells the three others in his birding clan. Binoculars turn toward a cabbage palm and a clump of saw palmetto. It's a palm warbler. Another hash mark is added to the growing list of sightings.

Around the Fort Myers area, 30 people, split-up into groups of two to four, spanned out in a 15 mile-wide circle to help with the Audubon Society's annual Christmas Bird Count.

For 106 years now, birding groups from around the globe have joined together this time of year to take inventory of birds in their communities. The bird counts can take place in any community in the world on any day between Dec. 14 and Jan. 5.

In Collier and Lee counties, six different bird groups from the Ten Thousand Islands to Sanibel and Captiva are participating in the annual count.

McGrath, Vice President of the Caloosa Bird Club, led birders in the count in Fort Myers Monday.

He also organized more than 100 birders on Sanibel and Captiva Islands on Saturday. Data from the Fort Myers and Sanibel-Captiva counts wasn't totaled by deadline Monday.



Erik Kellar/Staff

Peter Murphy, of Naples, center, identifies and counts the birds he spots through his binoculars at Lakes Park in South Fort Myers on Monday. Murphy was joined by tens of thousands of people across the Americas who turned out for the 106th Christmas Bird Count. Volunteers from the Alaskan Arctic to South America took part in the annual count of our feathered friends.

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In the span of about two hours at Lakes Park, McGrath and his team identified 34 different species of birds. Coots, grebes and moorhen bobbed in and out of the marshes; little blue herons, green herons, great blue herons and great egrets hunched at the edges of rock islands; anhinga and cormorants perched on partially submerged limbs and a few opened their damp wings to dry; gnatcatchers flittered about the branches of scrub and laurel oak; and a sharp-shinned hawk surveyed the lake on a soar above the melaleuca and Australian pine.

Though Lakes Park is surrounded by urban hustle and bustle and a new housing development is in the works right beside it, the park attracts a wide variety of birds. The county is removing exotic trees such as melaleuca from the park and creating more marshland habitat.

McGrath said he's hoping ducks and bitterns eventually visit the park to take advantage of the new marshes, but the nearby development visibly annoys him because it means more loss of bird habitat.

"The birds don't like it very much, either," he said.

More wooded upland areas, full of oaks and slash pine, would help to re-establish area song birds, McGrath said. Over the years, he said, he's seen sparrows become more rare, while adaptable birds, such as gulls, become more prevalent.

"The more garbage you have around, the more birds that are attracted to garbage are around," McGrath said.

By the end of the day, the most remarkable find in Fort Myers was a bunch of house finches on Colonial Boulevard, said McGrath. His group found 63 species in their South Fort Myers survey area.

"There's really more things missing than usual," McGrath said. "The habitat's just getting too heavily degraded."

Doug Sutor, who will be compiling bird lists for the Naples count on Friday, said parks and man-made marshes are some of best places to find birds in urban areas. Eagle Lakes Park in Naples, a mitigation site for a wastewater treatment plant, is one of Sutor's favorite birding spots, he said.

During the last two bird counts, bird watchers found a pair of Eurasian widgeons in the park.

Sutor said he's heard reports that the ducks are back this year, so there's a good chance they'll make it into the log again.

Grouped into teams of three to six people, the Naples bird-counters will also fan out in a 15-mile wide circle, with the Collier County Courthouse as the center.



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Sally Stein, compiler for the Corkscrew count that took place on Saturday, said the statistics from the counts are used to track trends in bird species over time.

The data is also used by the makers of field guides to help map out bird habitat ranges.

The Corkscrew count spanned from Immokalee to Golden Gate Estates and included the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary. Stein said about 40 people participated and logged 118 species of birds, including painted and indigo buntings, a brown-headed nuthatch, several wood storks, a purple gallinule, a bard owl and for the first time ever documented at Corkscrew, black-bellied whistling ducks. Last year, Corkscrew birders counted a record 128 species of birds. Stein said the wet weather may have contributed to the slight decline in sighting this year.

The tradition of counting birds around the holidays has been carried on by the Audubon Society for more than 100 years, resulting in a lot of useful data about bird population trends.

"At the end of the day we count, tally and total," said Vincent Lucas, President of the Caloosa Bird Club. The local clubs send the information to the National Audubon Society and the organization plugs it into a database.

"It's citizen science, but it's actually very good because it gives a good picture of trends," Lucas said.



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