

Loudoun

EXTRA

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PHOTOS BY GERALD MARTINEAU — THE WASHINGTON POST

More than a dozen teams scoured habitats in Loudoun for the annual bird census Wednesday. Training their eyes on the trees at the Creighton Farms golf course in Aldie are, from left, Ron Staley, Joe Coleman and Tracy Webster.

Keeping Count of the Flocks

Numbers Are Down, But Rare Birds Seen

By SANDHYA SOMASHEKHAR
Washington Post Staff Writer

The convoy of golf carts stopped abruptly when someone spied a tiny bobbing head in the trees.

A red-headed woodpecker, one of the most elusive of the area's woodpecker species, had been spotted before in the branches at the Creighton Farms golf course off Route 15 just north of Gilberts Corner. And there it was again, its distinctive profile visible against the bright gray sky and its soft hammering barely audible above the wind.

"That's a good bird," said Ron Staley, 61, of Herndon, his face



A downy woodpecker, the most common of the species.

glued to his binoculars. "It's one of the better birds we've seen today."

Staley was among the 60 to 70 bird-watchers, experienced and amateur, who helped search out and log species during Loudoun

County's 10th annual Christmas bird count Wednesday.

They fanned out in teams across a 7.5-mile radius area centered in Hamilton, noting the names of every bird they saw or heard — including the common Canada geese pecking along the shores of nearly every pond and the loggerhead shrike that one team spotted south of Oatlands Plantation.

It was part of a nationwide bird census organized by the National Audubon Society, which founded the annual activity more than 100 years ago as a conservation-minded alternative to the then-traditional holiday "side hunt." During the hunt, Christmas revelers would spend a day shooting at whatever birds and mammals they saw, and

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Happy Birthday, Loudoun County!

250th-Anniversary Celebration Starting

By ARIANNE ARYANPUR
Washington Post Staff Writer

In 1649, King Charles II granted 5 million acres to a group of seven settlers in Northern Virginia. The land was carved into four counties: Fairfax, Prince William, Westmoreland and Stafford. In 1757, Loudoun split from Fairfax, and in 1758, Leesburg became the county seat.

Tonight, 250 years later, residents will come together to celebrate Loudoun's founding. The celebration of the 250th anniversary kicks off with a candlelight gathering and musical performances outside the Old Courthouse in Leesburg.

Anniversary events will occur throughout next year. In March,

lectures will focus on Loudoun women and the military. In April, the county courthouse will display historical documents, and in May, teams from the United States and Britain will face off in a polo match at historic Morven Park outside Leesburg.

The anniversary plans were unveiled Thursday by the Leesburg-Loudoun 250th Anniversary Committee, a group of two dozen volunteers tasked three years ago with commemorating the founding of Loudoun and Leesburg. Elected officials also attended the news conference outside the Old Courthouse to mark the occasion.

State Sen. Mark R. Herring (D-Loudoun) praised Loudoun's con-

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BY TRACY A. WOODWARD — THE WASHINGTON POST

James MacLeod, 10, a volunteer history interpreter with the Loudoun Museum, was dressed in Civil War garb for Thursday's news conference announcing the county's plans for its 250th-anniversary celebration.

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A map shows projects proposed and approved and those that have received permits.

5 Home Sales
See who's been buying and selling residential real estate, and for how much.

9 To Russia, With Love
For four years, embassy officials have cut their Christmas tree at a Middleburg farm.

14 Crime Report
Incidents in Leesburg, Middleburg and Purcellville and in the county.



Ryleigh Webster, 2½, vies for the attention of her mother, Tracy.



PHOTOS BY GERALD MARTINEAU — THE WASHINGTON POST

A great blue heron, above, was seen at Creighton Farms, while in Leesburg, a black-crowned night heron was spotted at dusk.

Cold Wind May Have Kept Birds Out of Sight

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whoever had the most kills won the hunt.

Today, the Christmas bird count has become the Audubon Society's signature "citizen science" activity. More than 50,000 volunteers of varied birding experience spend an early winter's day tallying birds across the country. They submit their data to the national organization, which processes the information and uses it to extrapolate long-term trends in winter bird populations.

The Christmas bird count is the longest-running database in the field of ornithology, or bird science, according to the Audubon Society's Web site.

The all-day census in central Loudoun began at 4:30 a.m., when a handful of hard-core birders listened for owl calls in the woods. During daylight, more than a dozen teams scoured various habitats, from the Potomac River near White's Ferry to the wetlands near Dulles International Airport.

The day ended at 5 p.m. with a "tally rally," in which the chilled and wind-blown teams compared notes and swapped tales over barbecue chicken and steaming bowls of chili.

Though it will be a few more days before the group comes up with its official tally, count organizers say the



Golf carts were used to transport the bird-watchers stationed at the Creighton Farms golf course.



The group spotted the elusive red-headed woodpecker.



Joe Coleman was one of about 70 bird-watchers counting in Loudoun.

number of individual birds appears to be down this year. Between 20,000 and 25,000 birds were counted Wednesday, compared with more than 32,000 last year, said Joe Coleman, an amateur birder who coordinates the central Loudoun count every year through the Loudoun Wildlife Conservatory.

"I think it was because of weather conditions as much as the changing habitat conditions in Loudoun County," Coleman said, referring to the rapid suburbanization in recent years of a county with a strong agricultural past.

Despite the frosty morning gale, which kept many birds hunkered down and out of sight, this year's hunt yielded 94 species. That is a healthy number, especially compared with the record of 99, Coleman said, though he acknowledged that a high

turnout of volunteers would yield a higher count of species.

Audubon will take into consideration the number of volunteers and miles walked, among other factors, when processing the data, he said.

In addition to that piece of good news, census-takers came across several unusual species. Aside from the shrike, a threatened species in Virginia, a plum find was a black-crowned night heron that one group spotted at dusk in Leesburg. And a team canvassing the wetlands near the airport heard the distinctive quick chirps of a Virginia rail, a creature that is almost always detected by its call, Coleman said.

Another interesting result that Coleman noticed was the high number of ravens spotted. In the early years of the Loudoun count, the group would see just a couple of the

haunting, blue-black birds, he said. On Wednesday, they counted more than two dozen.

He guessed that the ravens — which in this region typically frequent more remote, mountainous areas — have grown more comfortable with the presence of humans as the county has become more suburban.

Though the count is a scientific activity, it is also an educational one designed to expose inexperienced bird-watchers to nature and the creatures that share the Earth.

"It's always fun to introduce the natural world to people who are not used to it," Coleman said. Noticing the birds "makes life a little fuller."

"You really appreciate how phenomenal the world is, and how diverse it is."