

## Annual Census Keeps Tabs on Loudoun's Birds

By Kevin Myrick

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It was a chilly morning this past Friday as volunteers in Loudoun set out to take a census of birds in the county during the 11th annual Loudoun Christmas Bird Count.

The count, which is part of the larger 108th annual international effort to keep a tally of the population and trends of bird species, started Friday morning and wrapped up at dusk.

Joe Coleman, the event's organizer for the past 10 years, began his day at 4:30 a.m. Friday looking for owls. By 7:15 a.m., he had moved on to Phillips Farm in Waterford, where he and three naturalists and birders had trekked a half-mile and crossed Catoctin Creek to reach what Coleman described as a prime "birding location."

But the volunteers' love for birds is what drove them out in the early morning hours before the small hamlet of Waterford had begun to waken.

Coleman began birding years ago after he and his sister were hiking together and she pointed out a common species of woodpecker to him.

"Just seeing it in a pair of binoculars blew my mind," he said.

And ever since, he has maintained an interest in birds. He's been counting birds in Loudoun for 11 years.

One of the volunteers at Friday's annual count was Jerry Hawkins, who drove from Arlington to help count birds in Loudoun. He set a goal to see 500 species of birds in 2007 - a goal he is close to achieving. Coleman said such a goal could only be accomplished by lots of traveling to prime birding locations, something Hawkins had an opportunity to do through his job.

For Helen Van Risen, the real motivation for helping out in the bird count is not a deep love for birds, but rather a simple appreciation of the outdoors.



"I like nature," Van Risen said. "I like to be outside, then you go out there and look at birds and butterflies and plants and trees."

The idea behind bird counting is simple: Volunteers keep a tally of every species of bird they see while walking around a spacious natural area. Loudoun is divided into 12 sectors, and those sectors have sub-sectors that are divided among teams of volunteers.

"We try to do as thorough a job as possible to count every bird we see from the smallest sparrow to the bald eagle," Coleman said.

But with lots of ground to cover, even the best birder could count the same bird twice.

"We try to avoid duplicating, but so long as it is a wild bird we'll count it," Coleman said.

In the predawn hours Friday morning, Coleman began searching for owls, especially the elusive Northern Saw-whet Owl, which birders believe is migrating into Northern Virginia looking for new food sources.

When the data are compiled, the official count is determined by a number of factors, including how far the birders walked and how their information compared with information collected by other volunteers.

The data that Coleman and others like him collect from around the country are compiled and analyzed to determine the population and migratory trends of birds on a global scale. The count includes Canada, and countries in South America, Europe and other places around the world.

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Organizers said development in Loudoun has had an effect on some species of birds in the county, especially those that rely on farmland to survive during the winter. As the county expands and wildlife habitats shrink, those rural birds are leaving and are being replaced by birds that can tolerate the presence of humans.

“Birds that one would find in a rural area are disappearing from the county while birds that are comfortable around people are increasing in their numbers,” Coleman said.

The number of Canadian geese has grown in Loudoun over the past 20 years, as has the number of black vultures. The vulture, which saw a large population increase around Richmond 20 years ago, Coleman said, now is being spotted more frequently.

But other populations are dropping, like the Northern Bobwhite. Seeing one is rare, and Coleman cites theories that ornithologists have developed, such as mixed breeding of Northern Bobwhites and loss of habitat.

Coleman is keeping a monthly census of birds around his house, hoping to compile data on his favorite species of birds and to know when they arrive and leave as the seasons change.

“It’s very intriguing because you actually find out when the White Crown sparrows show up and leave and how many there are, and that there are purple finches this year,” he said.