

Haddam Garden Club

February 2025 Garden Blog Article

by Terry Twigg



Citizen Science at Home

If counting sheep is a great way to fall asleep, counting birds is a great way to appreciate the variety and personalities of the many species visiting your yard, while doing your bit to add to our understanding of migratory patterns, feeding habits, and the effects of natural and artificial threats on bird populations. It's February again, time to sign up for the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC). I've talked about the count before, but it's been a while.

The Great Backyard Bird Count was launched in 1998 by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the Audubon Society, and joined by Birds Canada in 2009. The project, designed for community participation or 'citizen science,' invites people to spend some time counting birds in a defined area and reporting the results back. Since 2013, the data has been entered into eBird, which is the world's largest citizen science project.

How to participate. Go to <https://www.birdcount.org/participate/> for step-by-step instructions. They're pretty basic: First, choose a location—your back yard, favorite hiking trail, local park? Then, any day between February 14 and 17, spend at least 15 minutes counting every bird you see or hear, by number and species. You can report them on your phone, using either the eBird mobile app or the Merlin Bird app, or on your laptop—easy instructions are provided.

What if you can't identify many birds? Most of us readily recognize the outspoken blue jays and beloved red cardinals. Equally, many of us are far less able to distinguish among the many small brown and greyish-brown birds that frequent our feeders. Is it a wren or a sparrow? Maybe a finch? Not to worry. Beginner birdwatchers can download a cheat sheet checklist of birds commonly found in our area from eBird, and the Merlin app helps you identify birds by appearance or song. With just a bit of practice, you'll soon be able to recognize most of your local bird community. In no time at all, you'll be impressing your friends, blithely pointing out the differences between a house sparrow and a northern house wren.

The GBBC is one of those rare activities that are as well suited to introverts as to the most gregarious among us. If you prefer solitude and quiet, the better to concentrate on your numbers, head outdoors by yourself. If you like to work or play in a group, gather your friends, colleagues (a single lunch hour is sufficient), kids or grandkids, and make it a communal count. I can't think of a better way to get more people interested in birds, and in the larger world they inhabit alongside us humans.

Why does it matter? There are about 10,000 bird species in the world, of which 420-450 spend time in Connecticut. Of these, 175 species nest here, and about 55 remain through the winter. The GBBC alerts the scientific community to changes in migratory habits, and warns us when particular bird populations are declining.

Connecticut hosts so many different birds because it offers a mix of habitats. In northeastern Connecticut we have relatively untouched forests; mid-state boasts open grasslands, and the coast offers beaches, marshes, and mudflats. Some birds stick with a specific habitat, while others, like robins, blue jays, and chickadees, make themselves at home just about anywhere. Some are success stories: since the banning of DDT 70 years ago, high-nesting ospreys and bald eagles have made impressive comebacks. Others are threatened: piping plovers and American oystercatchers, both of which nest on the beach, find it hard to compete for safe nesting space on the crowded shoreline.

Birds face a number of other hazards. About one *billion* birds die every year due to window strikes; let this be your annual reminder to turn off (or at least put on timers and direct downwards) your outdoor lights, at least as migration season approaches, and pull the curtains after dark. But the greatest danger comes from pesticides, particularly those containing neonicotinoids. The Connecticut Audubon Society's annual "State of the Birds" report lists the many ways these poisons threaten birds (and bees, too):

- They kill insects, which are crucial food sources for birds, particularly in breeding season (adults can eat seeds, but babies depend on soft-bodied insects).
- They kill birds directly, if they happen to eat a contaminated seed.
- Even if they don't kill outright, they kill indirectly by damaging bird fertility, navigational skills, or immune systems, or by causing weight loss. When a bird's weight is measured in ounces, but its migration route is measured in thousands of miles, catastrophe is never far away.

Neonicotinoids are sold under several brand names and generic names, so checking whether a particular garden product contains them isn't as easy as it should be. A useful list can be found at <https://www.greatsunflower.org/GardenNeonictinoids> (note: the misspelling is in the website).

This February, your bird-saving mission has four parts:

- Sign up for the Great Backyard Bird Watch, and encourage your family and friends to join in.
- Turn off the lights! Close curtains at night, and add stickers to your windows so birds know to avoid them.
- Don't use any product containing neonicotinoids.
- Many countries and some states have already banned the use of neonicotinoids. Contact your elected representatives and urge them to vote to do the same.

Happy birding!