



# Cuckoo, No; Yellow-bellied, Yes —birders ring in New Lang Syne

By Craig Thompson

*Looking back on their New Year's celebration, people usually think of merriment, champagne, resolutions kept (or otherwise), and...birdwatching?*

Few people in their right mind would willingly rise at the crack of dawn on the January 1<sup>st</sup> holiday and brave the wintry elements to look for birds. Unless, that is, they're some of the hard-core aviphiles who for thirty years now have participated in the annual New Year's Day Bird Count at DEC's Five Rivers Environmental Education Center in Delmar, just south of Albany. Amazingly, this informal foray—billed as “Albany's First Morning”—typically attracts more than fifty early risers, who have collectively (and

unwittingly) amassed a considerable body of hard scientific data, reflecting many interesting and important large-scale ornithological trends.

## *Hearty Party*

As the eager participants gather in the comfort of the Visitor Center's bird-

watching lounge at 9 a.m., a careful count is made of visitors to the center's

birdfeeders. Upwards of 30 bird species can be tallied at the feeders, making one wonder exactly why it is necessary to go outdoors at all!

But there are many winter bird species which do not visit feeders—owls, for example—so field parties are mustered and assigned divergent routes throughout the 450-acre site. After about an hour afield, birding parties reassemble at the Visitor Center to defrost over hot coffee and to compile the morning's data, which

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kicks off the center's new annual list of species either seen or heard at the center.

Though the site is one of the finest places in the Capital Region to watch birds, the number of New Year's Day species recorded is highly weather dependent and particularly influenced by wind speed and the availability of open water. Counts have ranged from a low of 21 species to a high of 38, but the average is 33 species, just less than half of the composite total of 70 different bird species seen at the center on New Year's Day over a 30-year period.

Of those 70 species, 12 have been recorded on each of the 30 annual January 1<sup>st</sup> counts, and 21 tallied in 25 years or more. These “usual suspects”

Susan Shafer



Participants in the New Year's Day bird count often see more than 30 different species of birds.



## Get Involved and Have Fun by keeping track of birds you see at home

No matter where you live, you can take note of the birds you see in your own yard, or contribute to a larger effort at a local park or nature center. Birders of all ages and skill levels can help biologists better understand the health of bird populations and identify emerging trends simply by sharing their casual bird sightings with researchers. The success of these "citizen science" projects depends on the participation of interested individuals willing to contribute their observations. We encourage you to get involved and help scientists learn more about the changing bird landscape as you learn more about birds.

### Great Backyard Bird Count

A joint citizen science initiative of Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology and National Audubon Society, the Great Backyard Bird Count is an annual event conducted during the third weekend in February. Observers simply count the highest number of each species they see at any one time in their backyard, schoolyard, or local park during an outing (or an "inning") of at least 15 minutes, and enter their tally on the Great Backyard Bird Count website. The count helps track the distribution and abundance of birds throughout North America in late winter, a time when few other large-scale bird counts are conducted. Visit [www.birdsource.org/gbbc](http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc) to learn how to participate. For further reading, see "Great Backyard Bird Count" in the December 2001 issue of *Conservationist*.

### Christmas Bird Count

Each year, affiliate chapters of the National Audubon Society conduct local Christmas Bird Counts on a chosen date between December 14 and January 2. Last year, 60,000 volunteers across the U.S., Canada and 19 countries in the Western Hemisphere participated in their local all-day count. The voluminous ornithological data amassed in more than 100 years of this census have enabled biologists to monitor the early-winter status of bird populations. To participate in a count near you, log onto the Christmas Bird Count home page at [www.audubon.org/bird/cbc](http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc). For further reading, see "Still Counting After All These Years" in the December 2007 *Conservationist*.

### Project FeederWatch

Project FeederWatch is a seasonal research and education project of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology and Bird Studies Canada. The 2010-11 reporting season began November 13, but you can enroll at any time by visiting [www.feederwatch.org](http://www.feederwatch.org). Participants keep track of their backyard birds through the winter, reporting the numbers and different species of birds at their feeders each week on the FeederWatch website. This helps scientists track changes in winter bird populations from year to year. For further reading, see "Project FeederWatch" in the December 2006 *Conservationist*.

### NY eBird

NY eBird, a joint project of the New York State Ornithological Association and Audubon New York, is a simple and free way for birders to electronically keep track of their bird observations in the state year-round, while simultaneously contributing important information to a growing database of bird records that can be accessed by researchers. To learn more about NY eBird, visit [www.ebird.org/NY](http://www.ebird.org/NY).

### NestWatch

NestWatch is a nest-monitoring online database of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Volunteers collect and submit nest records—including information on nest site location, habitat, species, number of eggs, young and fledglings—for all North American breeding birds. Funded by the National Science Foundation and developed in collaboration with the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center, the project aims to track reproductive success of breeding birds. To learn more, visit <http://watch.birds.cornell.edu/nest/home/index>.

are generally the common backyard bird-feeder species most upstate New Yorkers can enjoy and expect in winter, such as black-capped chickadees, blue jays and white-breasted nuthatches. However, 27 species have been seen on less than five New Year's Days, and are the kind of sightings that make birdwatching—even into the teeth of a howling winter wind—something of a sport, with long stretches of anticipation, uncertainty, and personal reflection on one's sanity, followed by a few fleeting seconds of sheer excitement. Long-eared owl! Eastern phoebe! Common redpoll! There is something irresistibly beguiling about what might be around the next bend in the trail, and reaping the benefits of a combination of savvy strategy, dogged effort and just plain luck.

### *Downies Are Up*

In the last 30 years, winter ranges of many bird species have changed, some dramatically, and the composite January



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1<sup>st</sup> record reflects these well. For example, New Year's Day data clearly demonstrates surprising range expansions in

tufted titmice and northern cardinals, two reliable January 1<sup>st</sup> species which were unheard of upstate 50 years ago.

tufted titmouse

Bill Banaszewski



American robin



Part of the reason for this is that the popularity of bird feeding increased rapidly in the 1970s.

American robins and northern mockingbirds have also expanded their winter range in the last 50 years and are common New Year's Day birds throughout upstate New York. Unlike titmice and cardinals, however, this increase is not thought to be linked to increased bird feeding, but rather to the succession of abandoned farmland into dense berry-producing brushland.

Because the Carolina wren's winter range is conditioned by the average

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minimum January temperature and the mean length of the frost-free period, the expansion of its winter range is often cited as an indicator of climate change. Interestingly, there had been no January 1<sup>st</sup> records of the wren prior to the 1990s, but it has been recorded in eight New Year's Day counts since.

New Year's Day data also reflect the remarkably sudden upstate expansion of the red-bellied woodpecker's range, first

logged at Five Rivers Center in 1989 and seen every New Year's Day since 1998. Winter temperature has been suggested as the limiting factor for this species.

Audubon Christmas Bird Count data show a precipitous decline in the evening grosbeak as a winter visitor in New York since the mid to late 1980s. Evening grosbeaks were recorded four times at Five Rivers on New Year's Day in the early 1980s, but not since 1987.

Yellow-bellied sapsuckers were recorded on the January 1<sup>st</sup> count for the first time in 2008 and 2009, reflecting record numbers tallied during

local Christmas Bird Counts in those years. There has been a 25-year increase in sapsucker numbers throughout the northeast, and the bird appears to be lingering later into the winter season at its northern margin.

Eastern bluebirds, not recorded on January 1<sup>st</sup> before 1990, have been tallied in 18 of the 21 years since, perhaps due at least in part to an aggressive initiative to place bluebird nest boxes on the property.

By itself, a single day's bird checklist is nothing more than a snapshot of a single locale at a given point in time. And simply keeping a keen eye open in your own backyard every day enhances your knowledge, appreciation and understanding of birds, providing threshold experiences that often engender environmental stewardship and advocacy. But when those informal data are combined with similar "citizen science" data over the long term, and/or to broader contexts, the collective result of even casual bird watching can help identify or reflect widespread environmental influences such as climate change, habitat destruction or disease.

And here we all thought we were just going out to watch birds.

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*For further reading on seasonal distribution of birds and how scientists study them, see "Flight Patterns" in the December 2008 Conservationist, and "Feathered Friends of Winter" in the February 2010 issue.*

DEC photo

