

## Join in on Audubon's Winter Bird Counts!

By Rachel Oppedahl

A garden isn't a garden without birds. From the orange, black and white towhees scratching through fallen leaves for bugs, to hummers sipping on a red-flowering sage, we are blessed in the Sierra foothills by their visitations. If you're a bird lover, winter is a special season, because there are several opportunities to participate in Audubon bird counts—for fun, and for science.

Audubon's 119<sup>th</sup> Christmas Bird Count (CBC), which includes participants from around the world, will occur between December 14, 2018 and January 5, 2019. The data gathered from this long-running count is used by Audubon and other organizations to assess the health of bird populations, so it is a highly structured process. If you want to participate, you must sign up in advance with an Audubon-designated, regional CBC group and receive instruction from the group leader. Audubon's Central Sierra Chapter sponsors three CBC groups in our area: Groveland, Sonora and Calaveras. Each group is assigned one day during the count period on which they tally bird sightings within a specified 15-mile circle. If participants live within the boundaries of the circle, they can cozy up at home and count birds that visit their yard, as long as they have made prior arrangements with a group leader.

This year the bird-count dates are: Groveland, December 14; Sonora, December 15; and Calaveras, December 29. The Groveland and Sonora counts' group leader is Steve Umland, [stevenum71@gmail.com](mailto:stevenum71@gmail.com); and the Calaveras leaders are Keith and Sandra Maurer, [kandsmaurer@goldrush.com](mailto:kandsmaurer@goldrush.com). Seasoned as well as novice birders are welcome in each group, so people with less experience have a great opportunity for learning. To learn more about Audubon's Christmas Bird Count, visit <https://www.audubon.org/conservation/join-christmas-bird-count>.

Audubon also sponsors the annual Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) in February of each year. For 2019 the count will occur between February 16 and 19. It is much less structured than the Christmas count, in that anyone can conduct a bird tally for as little as 15 minutes anytime during the four-day GBBC event, then enter their sightings online at [www.birdcount.org](http://www.birdcount.org). According to Audubon, "Each checklist submitted during the GBBC helps researchers at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society learn more about how birds are doing, and how to protect them and the environment we share. Last year, more than 160,000 participants submitted their bird observations online, creating the largest instantaneous snapshot of global bird populations ever recorded."

Both the national and local-chapter Audubon websites are rich with information and resources for bird lovers. With the Great Backyard Bird Count's [Explore a Region](#) tool, you can get a sneak peek at the kinds of birds you can expect to see in our area during the count. On the GBBC's [program website](#), participants can see what others are reporting via real-time maps during and after the formal count. And any time of year, the Audubon site offers endless information about birds, like: how to tell the difference between a raven and a crow; how to find the best native plants for birds in your area; and of course, how you can help save species that are endangered.

Another wonderful resource for birders is <https://ebird.org/home>, managed by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. According to eBird, which says it is “the world’s largest biodiversity-related citizen science project,” their goal is to be a valuable data source. “From being able to manage lists, photos and audio recordings, to seeing real-time maps of species distribution, to alerts that let you know when species have been seen, we strive to provide the most current and useful information to the birding community.”

Happy birding!

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*UCCE Master Gardeners of Tuolumne County can answer home gardening questions. Call 209-533-5912 or go to: <http://ucanr.edu/survey/survey.cfm?surveynumber=7269> to fill out our easy-to-use problem questionnaire. Check out our website at: [http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/Master Gardeners/](http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardeners/) You can also find us on Facebook or pick up the local UCCE Master Gardener book "Sharing the Knowledge: Gardening in the Mother Lode" at Mountain Books or the UCCE Office both in Sonora, CA*