

It's time for the bird counts

BY GARY SCHNEIDER

It seems hard to believe that time flies so quickly, but it's already time to start gearing up for the annual Christmas Bird Counts. Every year there is more and more interest in these events, which manage to combine a love of birds with an enjoyment of the outdoors (even in some pretty amazing snowstorms) and social interaction.

People have become more and more interested in taking part in the counts, which have a long history on the Island. The Charlottetown count started in 1902, only two years after the first counts took place in Canada. Some avid birders spend a better part of the day on foot, in cars, and on skis and snowshoes and cover many miles in pursuit of unusual species. Others spend an hour or two walking their favourite part of the count area, or report sightings at their feeders. All are essential to the bird counts.

Each count area is 24 km (15 miles) in diameter, and all parts of the area get at least cursory coverage. If possible, novice birders are teamed up with more experienced ones, which winds up being beneficial for everyone. In 1987, the National Park count yielded 44 species, 38 species turned up in the Hillsborough count, and 44 in the Montague area.

The Christmas Bird Counts are the most prestigious birding events in North America. While the first Charlottetown count was in 1902, they stopped sometime after that but were reincarnated in 1971 as the Hillsborough and National Park counts in 1971. These two counts are part of the over 180 official count areas in Canada and the 1,500 count areas in North America which comprise the Christmas Bird counts. The Montague count is an unofficial count (meaning the results are not entered in the annual North American report). It is free to all participants, while there is a small charge for the Hillsborough and National Park counts.

Besides being fun, the results of the counts are charted, and the most recent use is a book by Terry Root called Atlas of Wintering North American Birds, which is an analysis of Christmas Bird Count data. The Atlas doesn't show what birds look like - it tells where to find them in the winter months. It is available from the University of Chicago Press, but only includes southern Canada and from the two sample maps I've seen, P.E.I. is not in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Oh well.

American Birds, the yearly report of the Christmas Bird Counts in North America (including P.E.I.) is purchased every year by the Natural History Society and is available at the U.P.E.I. library. This year is the 89th year of counting in North America, and over 42,000 people are expected to take part.

Dates and coordinators for the Island counts are as follows:

National Park: Dec. 18. Contact Dan McAskill, 569-4351.

Hillsborough: Dec. 27. Contact Dan McAskill, 569-4351.

Montague: Dec. 31. Contact Gary Schneider, 838-2678.

