

Residents Invited to Take Part in Annual Bird Count

The Ohlone Audubon Society and the Alameda Creek Alliance are sponsoring the second annual Christmas bird count on Friday, December 17th in eastern Alameda County, within the Alameda Creek watershed. An estimated 50 to 75 volunteer birders of all levels of experience will survey for wintering birds within a 15 mile radius circle in the vicinity of Pleasanton, Sunol and Livermore.

This year the count compiler, Rich Cimino, invites backyard birders to participate by counting bird species and submitting information to him. Those interested in participating are asked to please contact Cimino at 925-353-0266.

Last year's count included 30 areas of the Tri-Valley. A total of 144 different bird species were found.

The Christmas Bird Count is an annual nationwide volunteer based bird survey effort coordinated by the Audubon Society to promote bird conservation and assess long-term trends in winter bird populations. In the largest citizen science effort in the world, tens of thousands of volunteer birders and scientists armed with binoculars, bird guides and checklists will take part in Christmas bird counts throughout the Americas from mid-December through early January.

"Our bird count will involve volunteers, ornithologists, and agency staff in bird conservation and monitoring. It will promote stewardship of bird populations and habitats within the Alameda Creek watershed," said Rich Cimino, Conservation Chair of the Ohlone Audubon Society, and the initiator of the new Christmas Bird Count. "We're very excited with the response and concern from interested citizens." Jeff Miller, Director of the Alameda Creek Alliance, added, "The bird count is fun and educational, hones your observational skills, provides friendly competition, contributes to conservation efforts, and gets you outside into some gorgeous areas during the holidays."

The eastern Alameda County bird count will complement 15 other existing Christmas Bird Counts in the San Francisco Bay Area. The Alameda County count area includes five East Bay Regional Parks, significant San Francisco watershed lands, and birding hotspots such as lower Mines Road, Sunol Wilderness, Del Valle Reservoir, and the Springtown area in Livermore.

Volunteers will walk, mountain bike, or drive count areas, or monitor backyard feeders during a 24 hour period on December 17th, with some additional surveys conducted during the week of December 15 to 21 to locate, identify, and record rare bird species. The surveys will be nonintrusive observations of birds, with volunteers following an ethics code to avoid any impacts to birds or habitats.

Notable birds that could be found within the count circle include: yellow-billed magpies, which are endemic to central California and have declined due to West Nile virus and loss of oak woodland habitat; bald eagles, which only recently began breeding in the Bay Area and have just been removed from the endangered species list; golden eagles, which are threatened locally by collisions with wind turbines at Altamont Pass; western burrowing owls, declining rapidly in the Bay Area due to habitat loss from urban development and also killed in large numbers by Altamont wind turbines; and Lewis' woodpeckers, brightly colored denizens of open-canopy forests that are a state species of special concern.

The history of the Christmas Bird Count has its roots in opposition to an early American holiday tradition known as Christmas "side hunts," where teams would compete to see who could shoot more wildlife and come back with the biggest pile of dead birds. Conservationists and scientists concerned about declining bird populations proposed a new holiday tradition beginning on Christmas Day 1900, a "Christmas Bird Count" that would tally birds rather than hunt them.

Birders and volunteers with any level of experience can participate and are assigned to teams based on their bird identification skill level and endurance. The count circle is divided into over two dozen sections, each with a leading birder with specific knowledge of the area.

To get involved, visit either ohloneaudubon.org or www.alamedacreek.org. The Ohlone Audubon Society is a chapter of the national Audubon Society serving southern Alameda County that works to preserve the natural world through education, conservation, and advocacy. The Alameda Creek Alliance is a community watershed group with over 1,750 members, dedicated to protecting and restoring the natural ecosystems of the Alameda Creek watershed.