

Some Raptor Species Increase in Annual Bird Count



December 21, 2012

The annual bird count in the Amador Valley yielded an increase in raptor sightings. However, the total bird count was down, probably because of the weather.

Rich Cimino, Ohlone Audubon conservation chair who organized the count on Dec. 11, said that he had not tallied the total count yet. However, from his own personal observation, it looked like birds wanted to stay put, because of the overcast sky. "When there is a low ceiling like that, birds tend to stay down. They don't want to expend energy. Less activity lowers their body temperature, so they don't burn off calories."

"I do believe we had very good numbers for birds because of the overall health of the open spaces we have. The open spaces are managed properly by agencies and city governments," said Cimino.

The preliminary numbers showed an increase in raptor population above last year. However, golden eagles were down from 49 last year to 24 this year. The 49 last year was a spike up from 21 golden eagles in 2010, said Cimino.

Peregrine falcons dropped slightly from six last year to five this year.

Other raptor sightings showed 174 red-tailed hawks last year and 210 this year, and prairie falcons were up from one last year to seven this year.

An Alameda County task force has studied how to lower raptor deaths from wind power turbines in the Altamont. Asked whether the raptor count reflects anything about the health of raptor populations in the Altamont, Cimino said that the data for the Altamont studies are separate from the annual bird count.

"One interesting number was for a non-raptor, the lesser scaup, a duck species. Last year there were 254, and this year 1100," said Cimino.

Birds that eat berries and seeds, such as robins and pine siskins, showed bigger populations this year. Cimino attributed the influx to less availability of food in the North. "They feed well here with the ornamental trees that people have in their yards," he said.

Some 90 people turned out as volunteers for the count, the same number as last year. Cimino said that the count itself, and the many good open space environments for birds in the Valley are an indication that citizen science is prospering in the Valley.

The count this year was named in honor of the late Bob Several, who was an editor of The Independent. Cimino named it in his honor for Several's deep concern for environmental preservation in the Valley.

There was no formal program to start the count, but Cimino passed out a paragraph that he wrote about Several. "When I announced it, they all knew who he was," he said.