

Christmas bird count to be conducted in area parks

Event promotes avian conservation, assesses population trends

by **Janet Pelletier**

December 11, 2009

Two environmental groups will sponsor a Christmas bird count Dec. 18 in local parks in an effort to promote conservation and assess where the population stands.

The Ohlone Audubon Society and the Alameda Creek Alliance are sponsoring the event where an estimated 50 to 75 volunteer birders of all levels of experience will survey for wintering birds within a 15-mile radius in Pleasanton, Sunol and Livermore.

The Christmas Bird Count is an annual nationwide volunteer-based bird survey effort coordinated by the Audubon Society. Tens of thousands of volunteer birders and scientists armed with binoculars, bird guides and checklists will take part in Christmas bird counts throughout the country from now through early January. Audubon and other organizations use data collected in the longest-running wildlife census to assess the health of bird populations and to help guide conservation actions.

"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," said Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance.

The first eastern Alameda County bird count will complement 15 other existing Christmas Bird Counts in the San Francisco Bay Area. The count area is in the vicinity of Sunol, Pleasanton and Livermore, and 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 Dec. 18, with some additional surveys during the count week of Dec. 15-21 to locate, identify and record rare bird species. The surveys will be non-intrusive observations of birds, with volunteers following an ethics code to avoid any impacts to birds or habitats.

According to the Alliance, 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, Miller said. 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 ohloneaudubon.org or www.alamedacreek.org.