

# “I Count” Winter Birds

Submitted by LeJay Graffious, CBC Coordinator



**Hooded Mergansers, Canada Goose, Buffleheads and Ruddy Ducks are waterfowl found on Cheat Lake in December. Photo by Derek Courtney, MD.**

Snow, snow, snow, slush, low visibility, cold temperatures and more snow sums up the 2009 Christmas Bird Count (CBC) in Morgantown on December 19. Inclement weather once again played a major factor during the official count day, shaping the overall results of the Mountaineer Audubon's annual bird count. Eighteen participants logged 87.5 miles by car, 29.0 miles on foot and 43.0 party hours birding to identify 60 species of avian fauna. I feel anytime we achieve sixty species in the winter in Monongalia County, it is a good day! The brave (Nancy used other adjectives.) bird watchers covered three of the four sectors of the 177 square miles. Generally speaking, numbers of birds were lower than usual, but we did have three new high species counts for Buffleheads (96 in 2009, previous high of 68 in 2003), Red-shouldered Hawks (3/2009, 1/2008) and American Pipits (79/2009, 8/2008). Some notably low census numbers were found with Canada Geese (371/2009, 736/2005), Mallards (230/2009, 714/2003), Red-tailed Hawks (5/2009, 25/2008), Rock Pigeon (118/2009, 588/2008), Eastern Bluebirds (29/2009, 67/1986), Yellow-rumped Warblers (10/2009, 43/1994), House Finches (27/2009, 410/1987) and House Sparrows (61/2009, 288/1988). Terry Bronson's team and Bill Kennel's team added a new species, White-crowned Sparrow, on count day for the Mountaineer CBC. Lower numbers can be contributed to many factors, especially the weather this year. Observers had less than ideal observation conditions and many birds demonstrated that they were smarter than the humans by taking shelter and not moving about. Rescheduling is always difficult; therefore, I did not cancel the count. I believe, in the future, it may be prudent to schedule a back up date in case of inclement weather.

Birders added an additional nine species during the count week. Count week is the three day period prior to and following count day. This year Derek Courtney added a new bird, a Bonaparte's Gull, to our historical CBC list during count week.

National Audubon's 109th annual Christmas Bird Count is the longest running Citizen Science survey in the world. CBC data not only helps identify birds in most urgent need of conservation action; it reveals success stories. The Christmas Bird Count helped document the comeback of the previously endangered Bald Eagle. In Morgantown this year, we found three adult Bald Eagles. We recorded our first eagle in 1999 and have had them in eight of the past ten years. The CBC documents significant increases in waterfowl populations. After mid-November Cheat Lake becomes a major waterfowl birding area when the water is open. Both eagles and waterfowl increases are the result of conservation efforts.

"Everyone who takes part in the Christmas Birds Count plays a critical role in helping us focus attention and conservation where it is most needed." said Audubon Chief Scientist, Dr. Tom Bancroft, "In addition to Audubon's reports on the impacts of Climate Change on birds and our analysis of Common Birds in Decline, it is the foundation for Audubon's WatchList, which identified species in need of conservation help."

"The Christmas Bird Count is all about the power of Citizen Science" says Geoff LeBaron, Audubon's Christmas Bird Count Director. "Our theme is 'I Count' because the work of tens of thousands of volunteers, extending one hundred and ten years, really adds up for the conservation of birds and our environment."

As local coordinator, I praise all who participated to make this year's event successful. Thanks to sector team leaders for organizing their teams for count day: Sue Olcott; Alan Clark; and Hillar Klandorf. Special appreciate goes to all the citizen scientists who gave their life energy to this event: Kyle Aldeinger; Nancy Bronson; Terry Bronson; Derek Courtney; Dee Fulton; Doug Hoehn; Bill Kennel; Bruce Ludwick; Gail Ludwick; Bob Lueckel; Tommy Lueckel; P J Murray; Katherine Payne; Mike Peters; Todd Schnopp; and Larry Schwab. Also, we are also grateful to Bob Burrell and John Hall who provided feeder count data. A full report, photos and complete bird list may be found on the Mountaineer Audubon's web site, [mountaineeraudubon.org](http://mountaineeraudubon.org).



**Derek Courtney, Larry Schwab, Katherine Payne, PJ Murray, Dee Fulton and photographer, LeJay Graffious, were one of the WVMO CBC birding teams on 18 Dec. 2009.**