

CBC TIPS: HOW TO HAVE FUN AND FIND BIRDS IN YOUR CBC AREA

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Whether you have covered your particular area many times, or you are new to the CBC, I hope you will find a few helpful tidbits here to help you have more fun and find more birds in your CBC area.

FIRST TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

CBCs are run regardless of the weather (except for dangerous extremes), and in Oregon it is usually a cold day, sometimes rainy. The first and most important consideration is for you, the birder, to keep warm. Dress in layers and keep your core body warm; this will help your body to keep your feet and hands warm.

If it is raining, you have several options, depending on your stamina. If you are quite vigorous, you can don your raingear and go for a walk. If your rain gear isn't so great, or you don't want to get too wet, consider using an umbrella (if it is not windy). Otherwise, your car is a great refuge. If there is any wind or direction in the rain, turn car so you can open a window on the down-wind side. In any case, hope for a nice day! ☺

BE A POSITIVE, RESPONSIBLE, AND RESPECTFUL BIRDER

When you are out and about looking for birds, enjoy yourself and the birds you are pursuing. Be respectful of private property (don't trespass) and be respectful and understanding of people's curiosity about what you are doing. If you see someone that might be interested in your activity, be sure to smile, wave, and if there is an opportunity, tell them you are birdwatching and/or doing a bird count. If you are near houses, whether in the country or in a residential area, be sure not to stare directly into someone's windows (e.g., if their feeder is directly in front of the window); move off to the side or get a different angle. If it is hard to get good looks at things without feeling like you are invading someone's space, consider if it might be worth knocking on their door and asking permission to look at their birds. You may make a friend and next year's feeder counter.

VISIT MANY HABITATS

Many birds are fairly particular about the habitats they visit. Great Egrets do not go looking for prey in a closed canopy conifer forest; likewise Golden-crowned Kinglets do not forage in the shallows of a lake. Birds are suited to particular habitats. If you visit only particular habitats in your area and not others, you will find only those species associated with the habitats you visited. To get good coverage of your area, become aware of the habitats in the area and spend at least some time in all habitats. Prioritize your day by spending the most time in the most productive and diverse habitats, and spend the minimal time needed in less diverse habitats that nevertheless harbor a few species you may not find anywhere else.

Some of the main habitat categories include coniferous forest, “clearcuts,” deciduous woodlands, oak woodlands and savannahs, riparian areas, urban areas, grasslands/pastures, rivers/ponds/reservoirs, marshes/wetlands, rock quarries, etc. Probably one of the most overlooked habitats is urban areas. Be sure to walk some residential neighborhoods if you have any in your area! Become aware of what habitats are in your area, or that you see as you drive around, and go visit areas that look different. At the end of this paper are more detailed descriptions of habitats and associated birds.

There are a couple ways to find out what habitats are in your area and accessible. If you have the time and capability, get on your computer and look around your area on Google Earth (downloadable from earth.google.com) or Google Maps (maps.google.com). Zoom in or out to see your whole area on your computer screen. Notice the different colors and “textures.” Zoom in to get more detail on the habitats. Learn to interpret what you see. If you have time, go out and see what the different habitats look like on the ground. If not, just look for different habitat types while you are going through the day.

SPEND MORE TIME AT HIGH DIVERSITY AREAS, BUT VISIT MANY LOCATIONS

If there are locations in your area with a high diversity of species, be sure to spend the time there necessary to record as many species as you can find, but once you are no longer picking up new species, move on. There is an important reason for this. Less common and rare species, by definition, occur infrequently (e.g., Rough-legged Hawk, Lewis’s Woodpecker, Say’s Phoebe, Northern Shrike, White-throated Sparrow, or something more rare); they are “few and far between.” In order to find these infrequent species, one must sample more areas, not just a few locations. But how does one know how long to spend at a particular location? Well, there is not an easy answer, and it helps if you know what to expect in particular habitats; but roughly, if you have not detected a new species (for that stop) in the last 5-10 minutes, you had probably best move on. At locations that have many species, it may take a while before the species tally slows down (e.g. a large pond). At other stops, perhaps a grassland area, you may immediately detect the 5 main species expected there, and then nothing afterwards. Knowing what to expect helps you determine how much time to spend at a location, but if you don’t know what to expect, the 5-10 minute rule is a good guideline.

GET OUT OF YOUR CAR AND WALK (IF YOU CAN)

Birding from your car can be useful in several situations, such as using it as a blind near congregations of waterfowl, or traveling and scanning for raptors or flocking birds in wide open spaces. Your car can also provide needed shelter and warmth on a cold, wet day. However, if you are able to get out of your car and go for a short (or long) walk, where it is safe to do so, you will significantly increase the number of birds you find. There are several reasons for this. While outside of the car you can hear more bird sounds that will direct your attention to birds in the area. While walking, birds will react to your presence by flushing or calling, thus enabling you to detect them. While outside your car, your view is unobstructed in all directions. Lastly, as you travel, more birds come into

view from different angles, and you enter the activity centers of more birds than just those that are near your car. So I highly recommend, for those who are able, to at least get out of your car (where you are not going to flush waterfowl), and if possible, walk a short distance.

ATTRACT SMALL SONGBIRDS

Make some sounds that draw the attention of nearby small birds (sparrows, chickadees, nuthatches, warblers, etc.). The typical technique used is called pishing or spishing. It consists of some sort of hissing noises, kind of like baby birds in a nest, or a sparrow being squeezed by a hawk (yikes!). These are made by blowing air out through your teeth, as when you say “ssshhhhh” telling someone to be quiet, or by making high-pitched variations of the “s” sound by using your tongue to focus the air through your front teeth. With these techniques you can make sounds like a jay, or chickadees. Almost any attempt you make will give you results if there are birds in the area. Experiment, be persistent, and you will get results. Sounds of small owls, such as Northern Pygmy-Owl or Western Screech-Owl also attract the attention of small birds. These sounds can be imitated by whistling, or played from an electronic device. The combination of small owl sounds with other small bird (jay/chickadee) sounds or spishing can be especially effective.

FOLLOW YOUR EARS

You say you can't recognize birds by their sounds? That's okay. But if you can hear them, they are calling to you; letting you know where they are. Go find them. Do you hear a bird that you cannot identify? Go find it. Not only will you find more bird species this way, you will surprise yourself over time as you begin to learn to recognize birds by their sounds.

LOOK UP

Birds are not restricted to terra firma and include air—the open sky—as part of their habitat. This is especially so for raptors that hunt from the sky, but many species of birds travel from one location to another by flying above impeding vegetation. Among the most common birds seen in flight are eagles, hawks, falcons, robins, blackbirds, starlings, crows, ravens, pipits, goldfinches, bluebirds, ducks, geese, swans, gulls, shorebirds, herons, egrets, and woodpeckers. We are usually aware of birds in flight right near us, but what I am suggesting is to raise your eyes up higher. Use your binoculars to look above ridgelines all around you. From there, continue to scan upward. Look straight up with just your eyes. Look for small specks moving across the sky. Once you see something, put your binoculars on it/them. Identifying some birds in flight requires previous experience, so you may have difficulty identifying some of the songbirds overhead, but usually you will have better luck with raptors. If you find a soaring bird, going round and round, look above and below the bird to spot any others using the same column of rising warm air (thermal).

CRUISE FOR FLOCKING BIRDS

Flocking birds, such as some sparrows, juncos, blackbirds, and geese, can be broadly absent in some areas, but concentrated at favored feeding sites. If you have an area to cover that has many miles of country road, keep an eye out for flocks of juncos and sparrows that flush from the roadside. If you see such a flock, and there is a safe place to pull over, look through the flock of birds. Sometimes there will be an additional, more unusual species present, such as a Chipping, Clay-colored, or Grasshopper Sparrow. Flocks of starlings and blackbirds, present both in urban and rural areas, can sometimes include a more unusual species, such as a Tricolored, Yellow-headed, or Rusty Blackbird, or perhaps a Brown-headed Cowbird. Don't just assume the whole flock is one species; scrutinize as many as you can, looking for something different. Then move on and look for another flock.

CONSIDER WHERE THE BIRDS ARE IN FREEZING OR SNOWY WEATHER

In freezing and/or snowy weather, some habitats become inaccessible to birds. If conditions are really bad, some birds will leave our area altogether, but most years there are patches of unfrozen or non-snowy habitat that sometimes concentrate the birds. In these conditions, consider where the birds might be. Waterbirds will seek out patches of open water. You do the same. These can sometimes be found on larger water bodies that take longer to freeze, at stream inlets to ponds or lakes, or at sewage treatment or active mill ponds that have a warm water source. If all or most of the still water ponds/lakes are frozen, consider looking for accessible sections of rivers and streams. Similarly, birds that frequent fields and pastures, such as meadowlarks, pipits, savannah sparrows, and snipe, will be driven from their typical haunts with just a few inches of snow. In these conditions, these open area species will concentrate in areas with open ground, such as under lone or scattered trees with sufficient canopy to reduce the snow depth, swales with enough water warmth to reduce snow cover, roads that become clear due to snow melt or vehicle traffic, and ditches that are slightly warmer because of the water flowing there. In addition, congregations of livestock at feeding and/or watering areas sometimes create rare open ground and food for species like meadowlarks, blackbirds, sparrows, juncos, and snipe. Similarly, when the whole countryside is covered in snow, pole barns and hay barns with livestock hay and feed will attract juncos, towhees, sparrows, doves, blackbirds, and others. Urban areas often provide snow-free patches under trees for ground-foraging birds such as robins, towhees, sparrows, and doves.

GET CREPUSCULAR

If you are up for it, dawn and dusk offer opportunities not often afforded the strictly diurnal birder, and since the nights are long and days short, the crack of dawn isn't really that early. Here are some highlights that might be your reward if you attempt some dawn and dusk birding: Northern Pygmy-Owls, while they can be called up sometimes during the day, will often vocalize voluntarily just at dawn and dusk. Great Horned Owls also frequently call a few times right at dawn and dusk, and are frequently seen atop roadside trees before it is dark. Varied Thrushes sometimes litter the roads, along with a few

robins, in the early dawn hours along forest roads. Although not attempted much in Douglas County, elsewhere in western Oregon, at dusk, Short-eared Owls can sometimes be observed (in very dim light) leaving their day roost in a large marsh or field with tall dense growth, while White-tailed Kites may be coming in for the night. Also at dusk, or shortly after, Black-crowned Night-Herons will leave their day roosts and let out a “wok” call. Just before dusk, crows and ravens may be observed in large flocks headed for a night-time roost. Wilson’s Snipe also gather before dusk at night-time roosts (e.g., sometimes at the island in the south pond at Stewart Park Wildlife Area). Placing yourself in areas where you might expect one of these species will increase your opportunity for success. Otherwise, just give it a try and see what you find. Who knows what other surprises await!

GO NOCTURNAL

Lastly, if you are really motivated, go try to find some birds at night. This will mostly be an exercise in calling or using taped calls, and listening for responses. Most species of owls, as well as Sora and Virginia Rail, will respond to calls at night. It is best if you are “daytime” familiar with the area you plan to go, so you know you are at or near reasonable habitat for the species you are attempting to call up and that the area is safe.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF HABITATS AND BIRDS

The following descriptions will give you a better feel for the major types of habitats to look for and what birds you can look for in each.

Still water bodies. I hardly need to say anything about ponds and reservoirs. These are easily spotted and attractive to birders as well as birds. Ducks, geese, herons, egrets, and an occasional kingfisher are normally expected. A grebe or loon is a bonus. In years of heavy rain, also look for flooded fields, whether pasture or agricultural fields; both can be productive. Also check out any adjacent wetlands, marshes (see notes below). Falcons and eagles often visit areas with concentrations of waterfowl and/or shorebirds.

Rivers/streams. Larger rivers and streams may host a variety of waterfowl, especially mergansers, cormorants, herons, kingfishers. Black Phoebe also reside along rivers. Some parts of the North Umpqua River may have Barrow’s and/or Common Goldeneye. Higher reaches of rivers/streams with faster water could host an American Dipper.

Wetlands/marshes and associated rank vegetation. Sometimes this habitat is associated with still water bodies or rivers/streams; sometimes it occurs in poorly drained areas of pastures. The common denominator is some sort of ungrazed/unmowed vegetation—usually tall grass/sedge/rush—with inclusions of willows, blackberry, or other shrub protruding or bordering such habitat. This is prime habitat for Virginia Rail, Swamp Sparrow, Marsh Wren, Lincoln’s Sparrow, and sometimes a rare wintering Common Yellowthroat. Song Sparrow would be the minimum avian component in this habitat. Nearby dense shrub habitat will usually have Fox Sparrow and Spotted Towhee, and would be a good place to look for a wintering Orange-crowned Warbler.

Douglas-fir forest. This habitat has traditionally gotten little coverage on this count, probably because one rarely sees the birds inhabiting the unrevealing foliage. Nevertheless, several species will be much more likely to be found here than elsewhere, including Hairy Woodpecker, Ruffed Grouse (in patches of deciduous trees within, such as alder along streams among conifer forest), Red-breasted Nuthatch, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Hutton's Vireo, Varied Thrush, Pacific Wren, Red Crossbill, Pine Siskin. Don't spend much time here, but give it a try and see if you don't add a few species to your count for the day.

Clearcuts. Areas of harvested conifer forests have not been visited much during the CBC, probably because they are often on private land. However, if any of these are available, they are worth a quick scan or drive-through at least, primarily for a rare wintering Townsend's Solitaire, or for a glimpse of Mountain Quail. Western Bluebirds may be found here as well, but they are found many other places.

Pines. Here and there we have patches of ponderosa pine trees. Some are fairly old patches of trees. Many hundreds of smaller patches have been planted in just the last few decades. These are worth stopping and spishing/hooting at. Rare winter Hermit Warblers are sometimes found among flocks of Townsend's Warblers in these habitats, and in general they have received little coverage, so who knows what you might find.

Oak Woodlands and Savannahs. I've put these together because they are often adjacent to one another. These often host Acorn Woodpecker, White-breasted Nuthatch, and Western Bluebird. In hilly open areas such as along North Bank Road, this habitat can produce the uncommon to rare Lewis's Woodpecker, and overhead one may find a Golden Eagle (be sure to distinguish from immature Bald Eagle). Keep an eye out for a Say's Phoebe perched on a fence or post.

Grazed pastures, bottomlands, and rolling hills. Livestock grazing has left these pastures with very short vegetation; short enough that species such as American Robin, Western Bluebird, American Pipit, and Killdeer can easily feed on the ground and easily be seen by birders. If you have this habitat in your area, and most of us do, stop now and then and scan the fields. If you see concentrations of livestock, check out those areas; muddy, wet areas may attract shorebirds and blackbirds. Again, keep an eye out along fence lines for a Say's Phoebe.

Ungrazed pastures/grasslands. Areas with tall grass that has not been heavily grazed or cut are often attractive to Savannah Sparrows, Western Meadowlarks, and White-tailed Kites. Although not tried much here in Douglas County, elsewhere in western Oregon such fields and/or adjacent thick marsh vegetation have hidden day roosts of Short-eared Owls that can be detected briefly as they emerge at dusk.

Grassy, wet, overgrown ditches. These areas, often adjacent to grazed pastureland, will also harbor Savannah Sparrows, Lincoln's Sparrows, sometimes meadowlarks, juncos, and other sparrows.

Agricultural habitats are also worth checking. Some of the best are corn- or wheat-stubble fields (not common in our area), pumpkin/squash fields, alfalfa fields, recently plowed fields. Sparrows, pipits, shorebirds, herons/egrets, and waterfowl can sometimes be found here. Filbert/hazelnut and other orchards, and blueberry fields also sometimes have groups of sparrows; overwintering Chipping Sparrows have typically been found here.

Urban Areas. Probably the most overlooked habitat on many CBCs is urban habitat. Believe it or not, urban habitats, especially established residential areas, can have one of the most diverse bird communities in your area, second only to water/wetland habitats. Why is that? Well, I can think of three reasons. One is that the shrub and tree diversity in residential areas typically exceeds that in nearby wild areas. Many ornamental trees, shrubs, and flowers provide a diverse array of winter food sources and cover. Second, residential areas are where bird seed feeders and hummingbird feeders are found. Most White-throated Sparrows in our area will be found near bird feeders. Most Anna's Hummingbirds will be found in residential areas near hummingbird feeders. Most rare winter records of Costa's Hummingbird, Blue Jay, Northern Mockingbird, and Harris's Sparrow come from residential areas. Third, residential/urban areas often serve as warm microclimates or refuges, sometimes even water sources, especially in subfreezing weather. Poorly insulated walls, drippy faucets, and underground sewer lines all contribute to a warmer microclimate in residential areas.

How to bird residential areas: Especially look for (1) Seed feeders. Often you can listen and look for congregations of feeder type birds (juncos, chickadees, sparrows, blackbirds, jays). Track them down and watch them for a bit. You will often find the feeder(s) they are attending. Suet feeders are a special bonus, as they attract additional woodpeckers, nuthatches, bushtits, and even warblers. (2) Hummingbird feeders usually have some bright red coloration and are fairly easy to spot (but check to see if it has liquid). Take a few minutes and look and listen in the area. Even if a hummingbird does not visit the feeder, you may spot it whizzing by or calling from a nearby perch. (3) Garden plots and compost piles are also good "habitats" to investigate. The seeds and insects in these areas are attractive to birds. (4) Fruit bearing trees and shrubs. Many yards have apple or other fruit trees. If you can recognize these, stop and have a look. Even if no fruit remains on the tree, there may be fruit on the ground that attracts birds. Exotic berry shrubs, such as holly and hawthorn are attractive to numerous birds. (5) Look for areas of a neighborhood that have multiple levels of vegetation: shrubs, small trees, large trees, coniferous and deciduous. Vegetation diversity often means bird diversity. (6) Look for neighborhoods that are ... less well kept. Yards with overgrown blackberries, alley ways choked with untrimmed shrubs, and adjacent overgrown gullies, are often more attractive to birds than perfectly mowed grass surrounded by bark mulch and sculptured juniper.