

Christmas Bird Count Participant Preparation Guide

Purpose

This guide helps Christmas Bird Count participants feel prepared, confident, and welcome before count day. It is especially useful for first-time participants and beginner birders.

Welcome

Thank you for joining the Christmas Bird Count. Your participation matters. Whether you are an experienced birder or joining for the first time, you are helping collect valuable information that supports bird conservation.

You belong here. Every participant helps make the Christmas Bird Count more complete, welcoming, and impactful. Your observations, questions, and presence all matter.

You do not need to be an expert. Beginners can contribute by observing, listening, spotting birds, recording information, joining an experienced group, or counting birds from a feeder.

Before Count Day

Before the count, your local count leader will share the details you need, including:

- Count date and time
- Meeting location or feeder-watch instructions
- Group, route, or sector assignment, including accessibility information
- Name and contact information for your group leader (if applicable)
- Expected duration
- Weather or site-specific instructions
- Safety reminders

Please read all instructions carefully and ask questions if anything is unclear.

Quick Participant Checklist

Before you arrive, make sure you know:

- Where to go
- What time to arrive
- Who your group leader is
- What role or group you are assigned to
- What to bring
- How long you should expect to participate
- Who to contact with questions

What to Bring

Bring what you need to stay comfortable and safe during the activity. For field observations, suggested items include:

Essential Items:

- Water and snacks (bring enough for the time you expect to participate)
- Weather-appropriate clothing (layers, rain gear, hat, gloves, or sun protection as needed)
- Comfortable shoes appropriate for terrain and weather
- Fully charged phone (especially important for communication and safety)

Helpful but Optional:

- Binoculars, if you have them (helpful but not required for every role)
- Field guide or bird identification app
- Notebook or app for notes
- Cell phone
- Any personal medications or comfort items
- Curiosity and patience

If you do not have equipment, ask your local leader whether loaner options are available. Some groups may have extra equipment, but participants should bring their own if they have them.

What You Do Not Need

- Expert birding knowledge — beginners are welcome
- Expensive equipment — binoculars are helpful, but not everyone will have them
- Prior CBC experience — new participants can learn during the count
- To identify every bird alone — participants observe together and can ask for help

What to Wear

Dress for the weather and terrain in your local area. CBCs happen across many regions, so conditions may vary widely. Some counts may be cold, snowy, rainy, windy, warm, humid, or sunny.

Choose clothing that helps you stay comfortable outdoors for the expected amount of time. Neutral colors, layers, comfortable shoes, and sun, rain, or insect protection are often useful.

What to Expect on Count Day

On count day, you may participate in one of several ways:

- Field group: Walk or travel with other volunteers to look and listen for birds or participate in a stationary field count
- Feeder count: Watch and count birds at a feeder from a stationary location
- Beginner-friendly group: Join a slower-paced group with support from experienced participants
- Support role: Help with communication, welcoming, logistics, or recording information

Your group leader will explain the plan, where you are going, what information is being collected, and how you can help.

Participant Expectations

You should expect to:

- Spend time outdoors or observing from an assigned location (activities may vary depending on the group, route, weather, and participation option)
- Count birds as part of a team or assigned activity
- Follow the guidance of the Compiler, CEL, sector leader, or group leader
- Ask questions — beginners are welcome, and questions are encouraged
- Stay with your assigned group unless other arrangements are made (this helps with safety, communication, and data accuracy)
- Share observations clearly with the group leader or data lead
- Be prepared for weather and changing conditions

If You Are New to Birding

You are welcome. You can still make a meaningful contribution.

You can help by:

- Watching for movement
- Listening for bird sounds

- Pointing out birds you notice
- Helping record observations
- Asking questions
- Learning from experienced birders
- Staying with your assigned group

The goal is not to know every bird. The goal is to participate, learn, and contribute to the shared count effort.

Count-Day Etiquette

Do	Why It Matters
Be on time	Groups may need to begin promptly to cover assigned areas
Follow the group leader	Helps the count stay organized and safe
Speak up if you see or hear a bird	All observations can be useful
Ask before moving ahead or leaving the group	Helps avoid confusion and safety concerns
Welcome beginners and different experience levels	The CBC is a *community* science activity
Keep noise low when observing birds	This helps the group detect birds more easily
Respect wildlife, people, and places	The goal is to observe birds responsibly

Data and Observations

The Compiler or group leader will explain how bird observations will be recorded. You can also reference the Field Counting Quick Guide or Feeder Watching Quick Guide.

Participants may be asked to help with:

Task	Notes
Spotting birds	Watch and listen carefully
Calling out observations	Share what you see or hear with the group
Confirming species or numbers	Experienced birders may help verify

Taking notes	Some participants may help record observations
Reporting feeder watch observations	Feeder watchers will receive specific instructions

Important: Rare or unusual sightings may need additional details, photos, or documentation. Ask the Compiler or group leader if you are unsure.

Safety and Respectful Participation

All CBC participants are expected to follow data collection guidelines, prioritize safety, and help create a welcoming, respectful environment for everyone. These straightforward expectations outlined in the CBC Community Principles help maintain the scientific integrity of the count and ensure a positive experience for all.

Please follow the guidance of your group leader and stay with your assigned group unless otherwise instructed.

Remember to:

- Respect private property and stay on approved routes (only enter areas where permission has been arranged)
- Follow local safety instructions, especially around roads, trails, private property, or difficult terrain
- Let your leader know if you need to leave early or take a break — participants should feel comfortable speaking up
- Be aware of weather, terrain, traffic, water, wildlife, or other local risks
- Treat other participants with respect
- Help create a welcoming environment for beginners and experienced birders alike
- Share any urgent concerns quickly with the group leader, CEL, or Compiler

Weather Considerations

Counts run rain or shine. Weather data is documented as part of the count because it provides valuable context for bird behavior. Only if conditions become truly unsafe will a Compiler cancel or postpone.

Stay aware of weather conditions, as plans may change if conditions are unsafe. Watch for updates from your local contact.

Communication

Before count day, save the contact information for your group leader or local organizer. If you are running late, cannot attend, need to leave early, or have a question, please contact your local leader.

If Plans Change

Situation	What to Do
You are running late	Contact your local leader
You cannot attend	Contact your local leader
Weather changes	Watch for updates from your local leader
You need to leave early	Tell your group leader or main contact
You have a safety concern	Contact your group leader, CEL, or Compiler immediately

After the Count

After count day, local leaders will review and submit the count information. You may receive a thank-you message, count highlights, or an invitation to provide feedback.

Your participation helps make the Christmas Bird Count stronger. We hope you will stay connected and join again in the future.

Additional Resources

For more detailed information about the count, volunteer roles, data collected, and CBC policies, please refer to the CBC Guide.

Final Reminder

Thank you for participating in the Christmas Bird Count. Your role matters, whether you are an experienced birder, a beginner, a feeder watcher, a group leader, or a first-time volunteer. The goal is to count birds carefully, stay safe, learn together, and contribute to a long-running community science tradition.

Illustrations by: Diego Cobos