Audubon

AUDUBON CBC

CBC Field Protocol

Quick Start Guide



The Christmas Bird Count (CBC) is an annual community science project that tracks bird populations across the Americas and the Pacific. For more information about the CBC's history and purpose, visit our website or see the CBC Guide.

There are two primary ways to participate in the Christmas Bird Count:

- **Feeder Watcher** – Count birds at a bird feeder located within the circle, often in your own yard.
- **Field Count Participant** – Join a counting party to count birds in specific areas or routes within a CBC circle. A counting party is two or more individuals observing together.

This quick guide provides the essential information you need to participate successfully as a field counter on count day.

Here is how to participate as a field counter:

- **Sign up**: Sign up for the count and review information provided by the count Compiler or other CBC circle leader prior to count day. Based on your preferences and experience, you'll be assigned to a specific sector and/or counting party within the circle. Before count day, you'll get instructions on when and where to meet, what to bring, and how to prepare.
- **Observe:** On count day, you'll work as part of a team to locate and identify birds within your assigned area. Stay with your counting party throughout the count—working together improves accuracy, helps with difficult identifications, and ensures everyone's observations are properly recorded. Your role is to watch and listen carefully, calling out birds you see or hear so your party leader or recorder can document them.
- **Record**: On count day, a designated person in your group will record the following:
    - **Birds**: All birds seen and heard in your coverage area for as long as you are counting. Record only between midnight and 11:59pm on the count day for your circle.
    - **Effort**: Your start and end time, the number of observers in your party, and the number of hours and distance your party collectively spent watching or listening for birds by transportation type (e.g., 1.5 hours and 1 mile/1.6 km on foot, and 1 hour and 2 miles/3.2 km by car). Incidental checklists (e.g. spotting a bird while driving from one location to another) should be included.

- **Submit**: Once you are done, if you were assigned to record data, submit your data as instructed. You may be asked to fill out a CBC data submission form, share eBird lists (if you use eBird), or send data directly to your compiler.

Recording Time and Distance

Effort data is as important as bird observations—it's what makes CBC data scientifically valuable. The designated person in your group will record all time and distance spent actively looking or listening for birds within the circle.

What counts as "actively birding"? You're actively birding when you're intentionally paying attention to birds—windows open (if in a car), scanning for movement, listening for calls, and watching for species. If you're focused primarily on driving safely, having a conversation, or another task, you're not actively birding even if you happen to notice a bird.

How to record effort:

- **Track by transportation mode** – Record effort separately for each mode of transportation (foot, car, non-motorized boat, etc.). If using eBird, start a new checklist when you switch modes to properly track effort by each method.
- **Record party hours, not individual hours** – Log the total time your group spent collectively watching or listening to birds (e.g., if 3 people bird together for 2 hours, record 2 hours, not 6).
- **Record one-way distance only** – Track the distance traveled while actively birding, counting routes only once even if you backtrack. For example: if your party walks down a 1 mile/1.6 km trail in 30 minutes, then returns along the same trail in 20 minutes, record 50 minutes and 1 mile/1.6 km—not 2 miles/3.2 km.

Special cases:

- **Incidental observations** – If you see or hear a bird while doing something else within the circle but not actively birding (e.g. stopping for lunch, driving from one location to another, repositioning your vehicle), record that observation separately as an "incidental" observation. If using eBird to keep your records, select incidental and answer "no" to "are you including all birds in your checklist?" and assign a minimal amount of time (e.g. 1-5 minutes).
- **Do not record** – Travel time to reach your counting location from outside the circle, or time spent on non-birding activities (eating lunch, taking breaks, repositioning) unless you're actively watching or listening for birds.
- **Key principle:** If you're within the circle and paying attention to birds, the bird counts. But only log effort (time/distance) when you're intentionally birding, and always track it by transportation mode with one-way distances.

Additional Tips for CBC field counters:

- **Avoid double-counting**: When you are backtracking or revisiting a location, avoid double-counting by only recording numbers for new species you see in an area you've already birded or using the higher total number seen at once for a species already seen (e.g. previously you saw two kingbirds at once and while backtracking you saw three).

- **Nocturnal birding or "owling"**: If you choose to bird before dawn or after sunset, be sure to record bird numbers and effort for nocturnal birding separately from daytime birding.
- **Document rare sightings**: Take detailed notes (voice notes work well!) and obtain photo, video, or audio recording of any rare, unusual, or unexpected birds encountered and submit them to your Compiler. Your group leader can help you determine what might need more documentation.
- **Counting large flocks**: To estimate the number of birds in a flock, use the "blocking" method. First, count the birds in an imaginary block of typical density (like 10-25 birds). Then visually superimpose the block onto the entire flock, estimate how many times it fits, and multiply this number by the number of birds in the original block.
- **Similar species**: Some species, like Black-capped and Carolina Chickadees, are difficult to tell apart. If you live in an area where ranges of similar species overlap and you are uncertain of which species you are viewing, first consult others if possible. If specific identification is not possible (i.e. no photos or audio), record your observation at the species level (e.g., chickadee sp.).
- **Using eBird or NatureCounts to collect data:**
    - If your Compiler endorses the use of eBird or NatureCounts for collecting data on a given count, please follow the appropriate guidance for using these applications.

Thank you for participating in the annual Christmas Bird Count and supporting the conservation of birds throughout the Americas and the Pacific!

For more information, visit christmasbirdcount.org.

Illustrations: Diego Cobos