

Critters in Our Midst: Christmas Bird Count.

by Carol Ellis



This juvenile Yellow Crowned Night Heron blends in with the mangroves where it lives.

With its cooler, dryer temperatures, winter has finally arrived in the Florida Keys and the time to get out and explore nature is right here and now.

With that in mind I signed up for the 2023 Croc Lake Audubon Christmas Bird Count, in its 5th year since becoming an official Count Circle. I was assigned to a group with an experienced birder and other volunteers to seek out and identify birds, keep the bird tally log, and photograph.

The Christmas Bird Count is in its 124th year dating back to 1900, when ornithologist Frank Chapman started the tradition of the Christmas Bird Count (CBC) that would count birds during the holidays rather than hunt them. Prior to 1900, a "Christmas Side Hunt" tradition existed, where hunters at a Christmas gathering would divide into teams, go out for an afternoon of killing wildlife, both furred and feathered, and return to tally up the dead carcasses and declare a winner. Can't really say anyone was the

winner, as the animals were not even intended for the dining table.

This was my second attempt at joining the CBC event. In 2022 I showed up ill prepared for the rainy weather, as we walked through wet grass, with now- wet feet. That and my new camera anxiety caused me to quit after only an hour. The goal is to arrive at 7 am, count the entire day, and finish about 5 pm.

So for 2023 I set out prepared. I had weather-

appropriate, lightweight clothing and closed-toed shoes, a waterproof backpack to stash my camera gear in case of rain, sunscreen, water, and I had the most important item needed - an inexpensive pair of binoculars recommended by Audubon. In 2023 again we had rain, in fact, four days of tropical squalls and daylong downpours preceded the count. The Sunday morning of the CBC, the weather was clearing, but rain arrived early. Our group

decided to take a breakfast break until the rain cleared. Fellow volunteer and woodsman Jack rationalized, "If the birds aren't out in the rain, we probably shouldn't be either."

An organized group event such as the CBC, held annually

between December 14th and January 5th, is a great way to be outdoors and meet new people, and the count is free and open to everyone regardless of bird ID skill level. Don't worry about what you don't know, naturalists are very willing to share their knowledge with you.

Birding is a challenge for sure. Especially if you are not familiar with their calls, have poor hearing or don't know what you are looking at. I can check all of the above boxes! It was hilarious as the group would point out a bird that for the life of me I could not see.



Great Crested Gnatcatcher

That's normal, the bird has stopped moving, they assured me, look for the movement of the leaves. That helped, and when finally I saw the bird there would be a celebration.



As a novice birder, spotting a Tri-colored heron in its natural environment is exciting.

Christmas Bird Count CONTINUED Photos by Carol Ellis except as noted.



Piebald Turkey Vulture, a genetic mutation where they lose the pigment for feathers and skin. Photo by Jack Teasley

After finding the bird, raising the camera and getting in focus, I had to act quickly before the bird was gone. I guess that's why I have a lot of photos of birds flying away! The thrill of the hunt!

The CBC is a great example of citizen science, the practice of enlisting a large group of volunteers to collect and share data as part of a larger story. Our group, one of six in this year's Croc Lake CBC, sited 26 different species and 259 birds total that day.

Aside from organized events such as the CBC,



Yellow Bellied Sapsucker probes for insects on a hole riddled coconut palm trunk.

individuals can collect data on their own. Our group leader Chrissy told me she keeps track of the species of birds, and the dates they arrive to her yard. When I asked if she shared the info, she said it was more so she would know when to expect

time in observation.

The weather's great and the birds are here. Grab a friend and take a walk outside at Dagny Johnson Key Largo Hammock Botanical State Park, located on County Road 905, half-mile north of the



Ibis hang out in puddles formed by recent rains.

some of her favorite birds. My birder friend Harold encouraged me to enter data on eBird after my rare sighting of Black Swans in Key Largo this summer. He emphasized the importance of recording sightings, as trends show up over time, and are used to study the long-term health of bird populations.

The only way the CBC could have been more fun is if there were more people doing it. By the end of the long day, we were power walking the trails so we could get to all the areas on our list. It would have been much better with more volunteers to divide the territory up into smaller portions and spend more

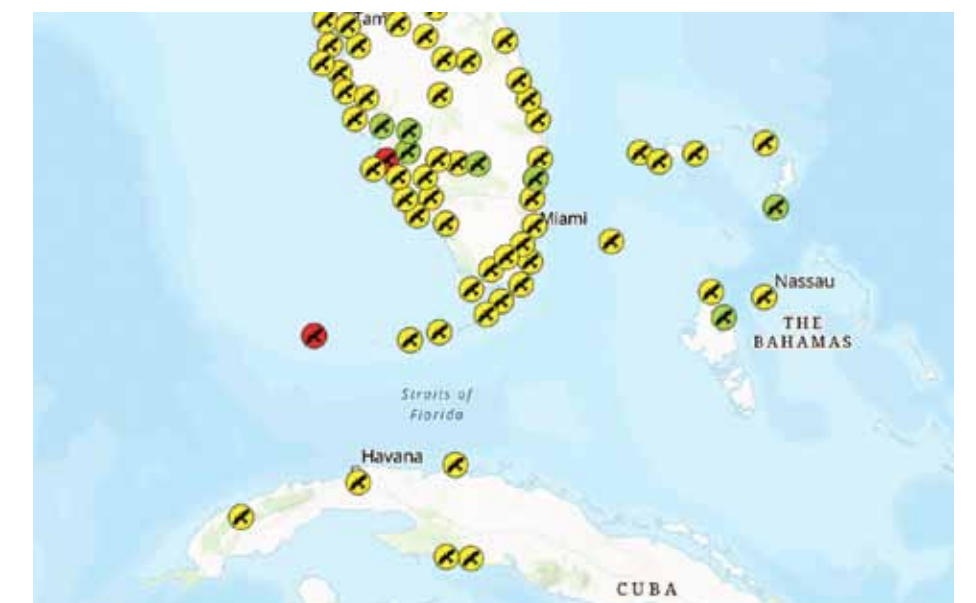


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A pair of Red Shouldered Hawks drying out at Dagny Johnson Key Largo Hammock Botanical State Park after almost a week of rain. Photo by Bunny Bradov



Designated CBC areas in the Florida Keys are Dry Tortugas N.P., Key West, Lower Keys-Key Deer N.W.R., Long Key - Lignumvitae, Key Largo-Plantation Key, and Crocodile Lake NWR.