

Making Ripples

Winter Birding in Arkansas

by Amanda Bancroft

From February 14-17, you may have noticed an unusual number of people staring up at something. You may have looked up, too, since social psychology informs us that when a few people in a group look up, the whole group typically looks up. It turns out there are many good reasons to observe the skies right now, and the Great Backyard Bird Count which occurred last weekend is only one of them.

Bird watching, and the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC), is not only recreational but also important to science. In 2013, participants in 111 countries counted about 33.5 million birds, documenting 4,258 species—more than one-third of the world's bird species! The GBBC enhances a local birder's experience through online sharing. "During the count, you can explore what others are seeing in your area or around the world, share your bird photos by entering the photo contest, or enjoy images pouring in from across the globe."

If you missed this year's count, don't worry: there are local opportunities in abundance this time of year. "Arkansas is considered by many as the mecca of eagle watching during late winter," explains Jeannette Balleza of Wild Bird Watching. "Bald Eagles feed on fish as a primary food source, and Arkansas lakes provide the food these birds crave. Over 1,700 eagles may winter here."

We can see birds in wildlife refuges, state wildlife management areas, state parks, National Park Service lands, state fish hatcheries, state natural areas, and our three national forests. Arkansas.com/Outdoors has a great listing of these public access areas and includes which species can be found at each refuge. Devil's Den State Park is popular for the variety of birds that can be seen along hiking trails, and you can request a list of birds from their visitor's center.

Arkansas has almost 400 species of birds, and even more during migrations. It's a good destination for those seeking a glimpse of water birds like loons, grebes, gulls, ducks, and geese. Besides water birds, Arkansas has become known for sightings of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker, listed as an endangered species since 1970.

Birding is one of the fastest-growing outdoor activities in America, with 51.3 million Americans reporting that they watch birds. A 2013 report, *Birding in the United States: A Demographic and Economic Analysis*, stated that 21 percent of the population are birdwatchers. And 88 percent of these are backyard birders, meaning they observe birds around their home, making our local backyard habitats especially important.

If you're new to birding and want a little help, BirdingPal.org arranges carpools and has a listing of experienced birders willing to take you out in the field to various Northwest Arkansas locations. All you really need to start watching birds is a pair of binoculars, field guide, notebook and pen. The birds are calling. Will you answer them?

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