

Tree n sea living

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Preparing ✓ for the bird count

THERE'S DRAMA in the skies, on the sands, in the fields and woodlands that a band of binocular-users monitors all through the year. They're birders, keeping track of networks and travels of feathered life in all seasons.

In this community, they generally flock to the Santa Cruz Bird Club.

Around this time of year, club members and other birders help with a Christmas bird count, taken for the past 84 years through the Audubon Society.

Sunday's the big day locally; birders and interested friends will swarm marshes, fields, forests and the seaside to spot and count our winter bird population. Some counters even will take to the seas, to record the pelagic population.

The Audubon Christmas count originally was taken Christmas Day, 1900, by organized binocular-carrying strollers in 25 locations, mostly around major northeastern cities.

Now, the count is done in 1,500 locations from Hawaii to Labrador, from Alaska to Venezuela, during the period Dec. 17 to Jan. 2. Participants number over 35,000.

Among local counters will be Carolyn Frederiksen, a member of Santa Cruz Bird Club for seven years who has spent every Friday of the past five years checking up on an inconspicuous beach dweller called the Snowy Plover. Last Friday, before making her way in the rain across fields and to the beach near the Wilder Ranch, she paused to talk.

"At first, we were trying to find out if the coastal population is maintaining itself; now we are watching movement between the populations," explained Frederiksen, a program manager's assistant at the Human Resources Agency.

She expected to see from six to 12 birds, four or five of them banded for identification. If that figure seems small, it's because the bird is considered a species of "special concern," but not endangered, she continued.



Pete Amos/Sentinel

Keeping an eye on local bird population is a year-round activity for Carolyn Frederiksen.

In good winters, from 60 to 100 plovers will winter-over along this central California coast. This winter, and last, are termed "bad" by the bird watcher. Plovers migrate every winter to five sandy locations between Point Reyes and Ventura, having disappeared entirely from southern California beaches because the sands are carefully groomed, destroying the birds' dune homesites. Banding has shown that plovers breed at Mono Lake in Eastern California.

Sometimes there's great excitement in the birding world. Take last Sept. 4, for example.

Frederiksen and two other birders — Bruce Labar and Dan Singer — made a rare spotting that day at Younger Lagoon. A Yellow Wagtail, normally found only in

Asia and Alaska showed up, having accidentally taken what birders call a mirror route in its migration, according to Frederiksen.

"Within 24 hours, people had driven here from all over the state," she said. "Some drove all night from Los Angeles." Just to see the Yellow Wagtail!

"It was the first well-confirmed such siting in the state," she said. The wagtail lingered here two or three days, then stopped off at the Wilder Ranch before reembarking on its world travels.

Frederiksen says she recognized the bird by its cream-colored breast feathers, brown back and tail as long as its body. Its name, of course, comes from its distinctive walk.

Pretty heady stuff, for a birder.

This year, the Audubon bird count will be revived in metropolitan San Francisco, where it had been discontinued. The city count will be held Dec. 21 with up to 50 birders expected to fan out over more than 90 square miles, watching for and counting the golden-crowned sparrow and its feathered friends in the concrete jungle.

Santa Cruz' count will cover about 177 square miles in a circle centered at Henry Cowell State Park.

Last year, 85 people helped with the local count.

You don't need much experience to take part, says Frederiksen. Just be able to do some basic identification.

Labar has further details at 476-7583.

— MARYBETH VARCADOS