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## Bird-watchers flock for Christmas count

### Pine Island included in 107th annual event

By Kevin Lollar  
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Originally posted on December 19, 2006

Dawn at Galt Island on Monday was somewhat less than spectacular — impenetrable fog created a formless world of uniform gray.

A ring-billed gull was the only bird in sight — not an auspicious start for four birders participating in the 107th Audubon Christmas Bird Count.

The birders, all retirees and all members of the Caloosa Bird Club, had decided to start their leg of the bird count at Galt Island because the tide would be low at 7:22 a. m., and low tide on Pine Island Sound usually produces superb birding.

"You should have been here last week when we did our scouting trip," part-time Fort Myers resident John Sanderson said. "We saw 40 white pelicans and 22 red-breasted mergansers. But that's what you get."

And such is the vagary of



photos by Todd Stubing/news-press.com

From left, Caloosa Bird Club members JoAnn Kelley, of south Fort Myers, Jane Murt, of Fort Myers Beach, John Sanderson and Geraldine Sanderson, part-time Fort Myers residents, participate in the annual Audubon Christmas bird count early Monday morning on Pine Island near St. James City.

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A woodpecker was just one of dozens of species the birders saw on Pine Island.

birding and the Christmas Bird Count: Sometimes, you get the birds, and sometimes, you don't.

As the fog burned off, though, the birders, John and Geraldine Sanderson, Jane Murt, of Fort Myers Beach, and JoAnn Kelley, of south Fort Myers, hit other sites on southern Pine Island and counted plenty of birds.



A male adult cardinal peers at Caloosa Bird Club members from its perch Monday morning before quickly flying away during the annual Christmas Bird Count near St. James City on Pine Island.

Billed as the "oldest and largest wildlife survey in the world," the Christmas Bird Count started Christmas Day in 1900 when 27 birders decided to protest an annual competitive hunt by counting birds at 25 locations, mostly in the Northeast — the idea being that counting birds is better than killing them.

During the next century, the Christmas Bird Count grew: More than 45,000 birders participate in all 50 states, every Canadian province, parts of Central and South America, the West Indies and Pacific Islands.

The rules: Teams of birders — bird clubs or local Audubon societies — pick a day during the designated two-week period, Dec. 14 through Jan. 5 this year, then each team counts the birds within a 15-mile-diameter circle.

On Monday, from dawn until dark, 45 Caloosa Bird Club members counted 19,182 birds of 115 species in 12 areas within the local observation circle.

Each group sends its count to the National Audubon Society, which publishes a 600-page Christmas Bird Count book.

All four Caloosa Bird Club members on Pine Island are longtime birders, and, while the Sandersons had participated in 10 Christmas Bird Counts and and Kelley has participated in 14, this was a first for Murt, a winter resident from Indianapolis.

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"You'd freeze your buns off if you did the Christmas Bird Count in Indiana," Murt said. "Down here, it's warm and it's nice."

At the team's next two stops, a palm tree farm next to a slash pine forest and the Pine Island Water Treatment Plant, the birding picked up, and the birders, as good birders do, picked out even the smallest and quickest flashes of feathery activity.

Sightings included a marsh hawk, immature red-shouldered hawk, phoebes, yellow-bellied sapsuckers, pileated woodpeckers, cormorants, great egrets, cattle egrets, great blue herons, tree swallows, Florida ducks, cardinals, moor hens, palm warblers, yellow-rumped warblers and a snipe.

Non-birders are often amazed at an experienced birder's ability to see and identify birds with such ease.

But, then, birding is a passion for some — in 2002, the Sandersons took a birding trip and drove 36,000 miles through the United States, including Alaska; they listed 530 bird species.

John Sanderson compared a birder's enthusiasm for birding to a windsurfer's enthusiasm for sailing.

"You know how it is when you see the wind come up, and you don't have your board, how bad you feel?" he said. "Well, when you know the birds are in Texas at a certain time of year, you get a tremendous urge to be there and walk the trails."

Obviously, the Christmas Bird Count is not an exact science. Weather conditions can change from year to year, and birders' expertise can vary from one observation circle to another.

Still, the count is a valuable scientific tool, said Sally Stein, Christmas Bird Count coordinator at the National Audubon Society's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary.

"The bird count gives us an overall picture of what the bird population should be doing," Stein said. "This is the 107th count, and over time, we get trends. It tells us how some bird sightings have gone up or down in certain years. Then we figure out why there was an increase or decline."

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