

Fifty-one species spotted in bird count

By Nancy Kessler
Special to the Guide

Clear, sunny skies and mild temperatures added to the pleasure of scanning for species during the 87th annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count Saturday.

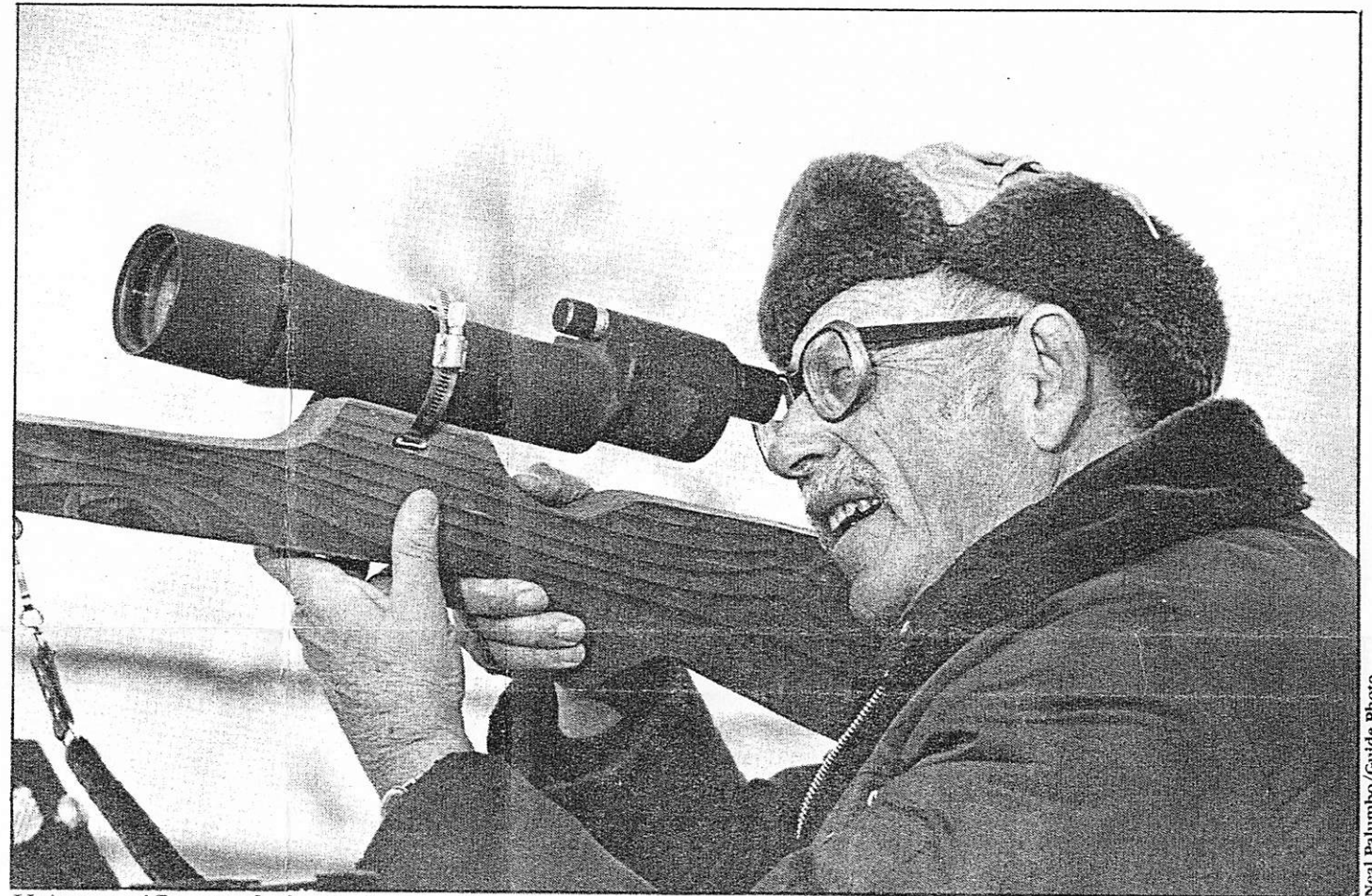
"It was one of the nicest count days in years," said Steve Grah, who organized and compiled the count with his wife, Donna. "We aren't getting reports of any really unusual sightings, but we have a few reports of birds rarely seen here this time of year and others in unusual locations."

The count area, a circle 15 miles in diameter with the center at Gros Ventre Junction, includes Moose, Kelly, the town of Jackson, Teton Village, the Elk Refuge and part of the Grand Teton National Park. Grah explained it is broken down into about 20 separate areas, depending on the number of counters and their interests.

"It's a remarkable area to cover," said Jackson Hole Bird Club President Bert Raynes. "There would be a lot more species if South Park were included, though. That's another life zone. I would like to do a count there because it would be interesting to see the differences."

Of the 51 species reported by Sunday morning, the rarer birds included a Cooper's Hawk (last spotted in 1983), a Water Pipit (1979), a Sharp-shinned Hawk and a Black-backed Woodpecker (neither listed in count day records going back to 1970). Other infrequent visitors seen this year were Townsend's Solitaire, American Coot and Rough-legged Hawk.

"It was a rather typical count," Donna



Using a rifle stock for balance, Bert Raynes observes a bird during the 87th Annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count last Saturday.

Grah said. "It was easy to see with lots of open water, but the wind cooled things down in the afternoon."

Renowned wildlife biologist Frank Craighead said he thinks the number of birds is decreasing at Blacktail Ponds, where he has been observing since 1948, perhaps due to changes in the pond environment. However, he and his wife, Shirley, spotted a Killdeer

(unusual for there) and reported increased beaver activity.

"Audubon wants to know about the mammals spotted, to see what effect they have on bird populations," said Steve. "One counter saw 52 moose along one section of the Snake." Other mammals sighted include muskrats, deer, elk and coyote.

The Jackson Bird Count was started

by Olaus and Mardy Murie and GTNP Superintendent Sam Woodring in the early 1930s as part of the now international event sponsored by the National Audubon Society, said Raynes.

"People count on foot, in cars, on skis and on horseback," he said. "Sometimes people go to the top of Snow King and count hiking down. One year some

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Neal Palumbo/Guide Photo

Bird count

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poor unfortunates decided to go down the Snake River in a canoe—an aluminum canoe. They kept having to get out so their legs wouldn't freeze to the cold metal."

Covering the west side of town with Raynes was a remarkable experience for this novice birder. From Flat Creek along Snow King Road to Elk View Road just north of the National Fish Hatchery, and not including the Elk Refuge, we counted 266 birds of 15 different species in about four hours.

Seeing a single Red-breasted Nuthatch was no less exciting as a flock of 150 Grey-crowned Rosy Finches. Other species were Barrow's Goldeneye, Red Crossbill, Clark's Nutcracker, Hairy Woodpecker, Mallard, Mountain and Black-capped Chickadee, Common Merganser, American Dipper, Pine Grosbeak, House Sparrow and, of course, Magpie and Raven.

We couldn't help but look across at the Elk Refuge, however, where we spotted (but didn't count) 38 Trumpeter Swans, two Bald Eagles, a Golden Eagle, a Marsh Hawk and a Rough-legged Hawk. We did tell the Refuge counter about our sightings.

"We have a really good turnout for the count here," said Raynes. "About 35 people go out, so we cover this area well." At the end of the day, counters met at the Teton Science School to share a potluck supper and field notes.

Anyone interested in learning more about the count or bird-watching in general is welcome to attend meetings of the Jackson Hole Bird Club, Grah said. They are held every second Sunday at 7:30 p.m. in the Town Hall.