

Christmas Bird Count Feeder Watching Guidance

The following tips are for participants recording birds at their feeder from their home or backyard. Be sure to confirm your location with your circle Compiler or Sector Leader prior to the count day so that Field Counters in the area don't double-count the same birds.

Notes:

- Record only between midnight and 11:59pm on the count day for your circle.
- Effort data are equally important to recording bird species and numbers. Record the number of observers and the amount of time spent watching and listening for birds at your feeders (rounded to the nearest quarter hour).
- If a rare, unusual, or unexpected bird is encountered, please ask your Compiler for a Rare Bird Documentation Form, fill it out, and return it to your Compiler by January 15. If you're able, try to obtain photos or audio recording of the rare bird and include that with your submission.
- If your Compiler endorses the use of eBird for collecting data on a given count, please follow the instruction they provide about sharing your eBird data.
- We encourage you to use this [Bird Feeder Watch Form](#) to record your observations.

How to Count Birds at Feeders

- Each time you see or hear a species within your count site during the count day, **count the number of individuals that you either see or hear simultaneously** and record that number on your tally sheet. (For example, if the first time you look at your feeder you see one Northern Cardinal and two Blue Jays, and you hear one Black-capped Chickadee record these numbers next to their names.)
- If later during your count you see or hear more individuals of a species simultaneously, revise your tally sheet to reflect the larger number. (For example, if later on you see two Northern Cardinals and three Blue Jays, and you hear two Black-capped Chickadees from two different locations, change the number of Northern Cardinals on your tally sheet from one to two, the number of Blue Jays from two to three, and the number of Black-capped Chickadees from one to two.) **Do not add your counts together**; record only the largest number of individuals of each species you hear or see simultaneously over the count period. By following this method, you will never report an individual bird more than once.
- At the end of the count, **the largest number of individuals that you saw or heard simultaneously becomes your final tally** and the number for each species that you will report to your sector leader or compiler. This method is especially important for species such as jays, chickadees, and nuthatches that will cache food and make repeated visits to your feeder over the course of a day.

Additional Guidance

- Please count all of the individuals that you **hear or see** simultaneously. For example, if two House Sparrows are on your feeder and six more are waiting their turn in a nearby bush, count all eight. Please include species that you see or hear but that may not be at your feeder (a Brown Creeper on a nearby tree; a Cooper's Hawk watching from a fence post).

However, don't include birds that simply fly over your count site, such as Canada Geese or Sandhill Cranes.

- Be sure to record only the time you spend dedicated to observing your count site. For example, if you are in the kitchen working for an hour, and you can see the feeders out your kitchen window for a portion of that time, you would only record the portion of that hour when you were actually looking at the feeders.
- If you cannot identify a bird, sketch or photograph the mystery bird and pay attention to its field marks before consulting a field guide. To identify a mystery bird, consult a current field guide, such as [Audubon's Online Bird Guide to North American Birds](#) or [Cornell's All About Birds](#).

Challenging Count Scenarios

Too many birds to count

It can be very difficult to count large or even small flocks of birds, especially when they keep moving around. To estimate the number of birds in a flock, use the "blocking" method. First count the birds in an imaginary block of typical density. Keep the block small, to include only 10 to 25 birds. Then visually superimpose the block onto the entire flock and estimate how many times it fits. Finally, multiply this number by the number of birds in the original block. To get the best estimate, repeat this procedure at various times throughout the day and average your results.

Mixed-species flocks

When large, mixed-species flocks appear in your yard, keeping track of the kinds and numbers of birds can be difficult. First, estimate the total flock size using the method above. For example, estimate a flock at 80 birds. Now, take several "samples" of those 80 birds, such as small groups that are easily visible under the feeder, and estimate the proportion of each species in each group. For example, a group of 10 birds might include 5 Dark-eyed Juncos, 4 American Tree Sparrows, and 1 White-throated Sparrow. If that group seems representative of the entire flock, apply your calculated proportion to the total of 80 birds, and estimate the total flock at 40 juncos (50% of flock), 32 American Tree Sparrows (40% of flock), and 8 White-throated Sparrows (10% of flock).

Males and females observed at separate times

Some species are "sexually dimorphic," that is, the male and female look different. An example is the Northern Cardinal. Some days, the male and female both may visit your feeder, but never appear at the same time. Obviously, you have two different cardinals in your yard. Still, you should only count them as two individuals if you see them together at the same time. Why? Because for us to be able to compare population trends for all the species that visit your yard, we must count all those species in the same way. Even if some species have males and females that look different, and some have males and females that look similar, we should count them using the same method. For example, we wouldn't want it to seem like there were twice as many cardinals as chickadees just because we can tell male and female cardinals apart. For CBC data to be scientifically valid, participants must follow the exact same counting procedure for all species.

Black-capped and Carolina chickadees

Some species like Black-capped and Carolina Chickadees are difficult to tell apart. Even knowing their songs and calls won't help every time because they can learn each other's vocalizations. If you live near the area where ranges of very similar species overlap and are uncertain which species is at your feeders, please record your observations as chickadee sp, for example.