

Birders flock to Tahoe's waterways for annual count



TINS Executive Director Will Richardson, left, leads a group Dec. 17 at Cove East to count birds. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

It was a hunting expedition of a different kind, which netted more than a hundred waterfowl, a ruby-crowned kinglet, magpie, stellar jay, meadowlark and more.

These birds were captured in photos, through binoculars, high-powered telescopes, and with pen and paper.

The birders were out in force on Sunday for the annual Christmas bird count. This one organized by Tahoe Institute for Natural Science is the only one in the basin.

“Our focus is on the lake level wetlands and meadows. They tend to be where most of the birds are,” Will Richardson with

TINS told *Lake Tahoe News*.



Meadowlarks are identifiable by their yellow chests.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

The weather cooperated for the count. While it was near freezing temperature-wise, the wind was non-existent unlike the day before. This was a good thing because birds tend to hole up in the wind, and don't make their presence known.

A large throng on Dec. 17 had their eyes focused on the water and in the trees at Cove East. Other groups were scattered about the South Shore. The local count goes through Dec. 20, after which the tally will be available.



Sue Stevenson gets an up close view of waterfowl.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

“These people are so knowledgeable. I learn so much,” Grace Anderson of Meyers told *Lake Tahoe News* as she walked near the Tahoe Keys Marina. “Tahoe is an amazing bird place.”

Richardson and other TINS staff dispensed tidbits of information along the way. The ruby-crowned kinglet used to breed in the lodgepole pines throughout the basin in the early 1900s. Today it would be hard to find them nesting. They come here in the winter because they are tough, Richardson said.



Resources are at the ready to help birders with identification.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

At the lagoon that juts north from the Tahoe Keys Marina area toward Cove East are more than 100 ducks. But then the group is told they aren't all ducks. A coot is not a duck; it's a rail. It doesn't have webbed toes like a duck, but instead has lobbed toes.

Those in the know are surprised to see coots, redheads, ruddys and gadwalls all swimming together.

Sue Stevenson of South Lake Tahoe has her scope out watching a redneck dive for food. It's like a dance of sorts that is mesmerizing.

She's been birding since the 1980s, having started in New Jersey. She's been doing so in Tahoe since 2000. Stevenson is a regular in the birding group led by Lynn and Don Harriman. They have been counting birds every Wednesday for the last nine years – either at Cove East or in the Upper Truckee Marsh.

At the Cove East count are people from South Lake Tahoe, Truckee, Carson City, Sacramento, Penryn and the Bay Area.

The group pauses to watch a meadowlark scamper about. It's distinct with its yellow breast and black collar. While it's not unusual to see them in the basin, it's not an everyday bird like a stellar jay or mountain chickadee or magpie.



Waterfowl are a predominant fixture in the Lake Tahoe Basin.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

This is the Audubon Society's 118th annual bird count. Tahoe has been doing it since the early 1980s.

"The data collected by observers over the past century allow Audubon researchers, conservation biologists, wildlife agencies and other interested individuals to study the long-term health and status of bird populations across North America," according to the Audubon Society's website.

The concept of the Christmas bird count came about as an alternative to the annual hunt where two sides tried to kill as many animals as possible. Ornithologist Frank M. Chapman came up with the idea, which in that first year in 1900 involved 27 birders in 25 locations.

Now the count goes beyond Christmas Day, spanning the period from Dec. 14-Jan. 5. While most counts are in the United States, the event is global.