

Bella Vista Backyard Bird Count Instructions

(rev. 6/9/2020)

Thank you for volunteering to be part of the Bella Vista Backyard Bird Count!

In order to assure that everyone counts birds in the same way, we need each person to follow the same counting method. This not only ensures consistency between counters, but ensures consistency among years, even over decades. This, in turn, allows the data to be used for important population trend analysis.

To count the birds in our yards, it is pretty simple:

1) Record the Amount of Time You Spend Watching and Counting

First, we need you to note the amount of time you spend watching your feeders and your yard. Please watch your yard for at least a total of 15 minutes during the count period. If you would like to sit and watch your yard for 15 minutes straight, and then stop, this is ok. Or you can watch your yard a couple of minutes at one time, then accumulate that time over the course of the count period for a total of 15 minutes. If you want to watch your yard for several hours, of course, you can do this, too. It's totally up to you! **But please keep track of the amount of time you are actually watching and counting (that is, not cleaning the house or making lunch for example), and please ensure that it is at least 15 minutes in total duration.**

2) Record the Count of Each Species You See or Hear

Next, do the count by keeping track of each species you see or hear, and how many of them you see or hear. **The proper way to count is to only keep track of the greatest number of birds you see in your yard for each species at any one time.** This is very important, and the key words are "at any one time".

An example may help:

Let's say that you look out your window and see two Mourning Doves and four American Goldfinches. You would write down a count of 2 and 4 for the respective species on your tally sheet. Some time may pass until the next time you look out your window, and this time you may see one Mourning Dove and five American Goldfinches. Because you saw five Goldfinches this time, and five is greater than the four you saw before, five is now your new number to beat for that species (i.e. it is the greatest number you have seen so far at any one time for that species). On your tally sheet you would cross off the previous "4" for Goldfinches and now mark down a "5".

However, for Mourning Doves, your new count does not become three birds seen, it remains at two, because two is the most Mourning Doves you have seen at any one time so far. You can't add this one new Mourning Dove, because you don't know if it's one of the same ones that you saw before, or not. Thus, on your tally sheet, for now, your count stays at "2".

As the day goes on, you may be able to beat the high counts for each species each time you view your yard, crossing off the old high count and writing down the new high count for each species each time. Sometimes it may happen, and sometimes it may not. This is expected and is ok.

Now counting can get a little tricky when you can tell the sexes apart such as with Cardinals. We know that males look different from females. However, we have to treat them as if you cannot tell them apart. For example, if you see one male Cardinal in the morning, and later in the afternoon the female shows up without her partner, your count is still only one Cardinal. The reason is because we count at the species level, not the individual level. Because we can't tell the difference between the sexes in all birds, we have to take the more conservative approach and treat them all as if we can't tell the difference between the sexes. This keeps the numbers comparable among species and makes the data trends more accurate over time.

3) Note Any Color Banded Bluebirds

For research that will benefit Bluebirds, we are currently banding a population of Bluebirds in Bella Vista. If you happen to see any banded birds, please send me an email, and a photo, if you can get one, of the banded bird.

One of our studies is specifically looking at how long fledgling Bluebirds stay in our area. Some birds have been banded with RED color bands and some have been banded with GREEN color bands. There may be other colors present, too, but we are specifically looking for red and green. If you see any of these colors, please note on the tally sheet in the areas provided how many birds you saw that are banded with each color.

4) Complete the Rest of the Form

At the end of the day, write down the maximum number of birds you saw for each species on your tally sheet, record the total amount of time you spent watching your feeders using the check boxes on the sheet, and complete the rest of the form.

Please only use one form for the combined two days. That is, treat the count weekend as one long counting day.

That's all there is to it! If you have any questions, please send me an email and I'll do my best to answer them. There is a Frequently Asked Question section below, so it's worth checking that out.

Thank you again!

Butch Tetzlaff
The Bluebird Shed, butch@thebluebirdshed.com

Frequently Asked Questions

What About Birds That Are Not Actually in My “Owned” Yard Space Including Flyovers? Should I Count Them Too?

Yes. You should count any bird you can see or hear when you are within your yard area.

What If I see/hear a Bird That is Not on the Tally Sheet?

If there are birds seen or heard that are not on the tally sheet, please write them in on the available space or on back of the worksheet. This may be quite common for those of you who live on the lakes where you might see various ducks and geese, or even eagles in the trees, as I only included common “feeder” birds on the yard tally sheet. While these additional birds may never come into your yard, we would like to know that you saw them, and it may be the only record we have for that species in our area for the day. Please count these species as you would any other using the method above.

If I watch my yard a couple of minutes here and there through the day from 8am to 4pm, does that mean I have watched my yard for 8 hours?

No. You should only mark down the time you were actually looking for and counting the birds and leave out the time you were cleaning your house, watching TV, etc.

Do I get to count the baby birds in my bird boxes?

You should not count your nestlings in the boxes. In fact, please only count birds that are capable of sustained flight. Essentially, if they are not yet capable of flying to your feeders, they should not be counted yet.

I counted over both days. Should I submit two forms?

No, please only submit one form for the two-day counting period. When counting on Sunday, you may beat your high-counts from Saturday. If you do, then mark down the new high-counts just as you would have from the previous day, because Sunday is merely a continuation of Saturday for our purposes. Just so you know, submitting separate forms for Saturday and Sunday does not actually help us out. I have to combine the forms into one form, so that it meets our scientific protocol before I can record the data, which actually makes the data less accurate than if you had submitted just one form for the two days combined.