



Backyard bird count begins this weekend

By Brandon Lowrey, Staff Writer

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The Audubon Society is looking for "citizen-scientists" to comb their backyards for birds this weekend as part of the 11th annual Great Backyard Bird Count.

Beginning at 7 a.m. today through Monday, participants will sit outside for a minimum of 15 minutes at a time and record which kind of birds they see. Then they'll send the results to scientists.

Statistical value aside, the experience itself is pleasurable enough, said Kris Ohlencamp, conservation chairman of the San Fernando Valley chapter of the Audubon Society.

"It's bound to amaze you," he said. "If you can walk around in a morning and see 60 birds ... when you've lived here all your life and probably seen 10, it's amazing."

The backyard bird count doesn't adhere to the strictest scientific standards, but ornithologists say the data are fairly useful and safeguards are in place to limit errors.

The information collected over the past several years has been useful, said Pat Leonard of

Cornell University's ornithology lab.

Before West Nile virus, the counts found American crows were the fourth- to fifth-most populous bird, she said. But since 2003, the disease-vulnerable bird has dropped down to about ninth place.

"We can't be everywhere," she said, "which is why we have citizen-scientists."

Those who do well and enjoy the count, Leonard said, can graduate to the more stringent Christmas bird count in the winter.

Audubon member Jim Hardesty, 71, says he's enamored of the feathered fliers because of their color and interesting behavior.

And he had a few tips for prospective bird counters: "Try to listen for sounds that you hear. If you hear something a little different, try to locate the bird. Sometimes they're very obvious. Other times, they're quite hidden."

The 2007 bird count saw participants send in more than 81,000 checklists, tallying more than 11 million birds of 613 species, according to the Audubon Society.

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