

Local Audubon tallies 128 species during annual bird count

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Count was one less than a year ago, but 25 more than five years ago.

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Marion County is for the birds - in a really good way.

During the recent Great Backyard Bird Count, held around the world from Feb. 17 through 20, local birding enthusiasts recorded 128 species over the four-day period, including black-bellied whistling-ducks, lesser scaups, buffleheads, hooded mergansers and long-billed dowitchers, according to the Marion Audubon Society.

Among the most commonly seen birds were ruddy ducks, ring-billed gulls, American robins, brown-headed cow birds and sandhill cranes. Among the least seen were birds such as the belted kingfisher, Wilson's snipe, hermit thrush, yellow-bellied sapsucker, white-eyed vireo and loggerhead shrike.

According to a news release from John Schaefer, vice president of the local society, "also of interest are the top 10 reporting sites used by residents during this bird count. Lake Weir was number one and Rainbow Springs State Park was number 10."

Schaefer also noted that the top residents reporting were Douglas Richard, Michael Paczolt, Josephine Muncy, Donna Schromm, Rick Purvis and James Sheppard.

The great backyard bird count is part of a global effort that started 20 years ago. The activity is educational and helps scientists and Marion County residents study changes over time in regard to bird migration.

According to Schaefer, the count for 2016 tallied 129 species. Five years ago, for 2012, the tally was 103 species.

"Since February is during Marion County bird migration season, there are more birds in migration recently as compared to 2012," Schaefer said. "Weather is a factor both here and in northern climates. For example, I noticed that sandhill cranes left this area in February of this year to fly up to Canada and Alaska for the summer months."

The annual count is a joint project of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society, with partner Bird Studies Canada, and is made possible in part by sponsor Wild Birds Unlimited.

To learn more about the local society, which offers guided birding hikes and more, visit www.marioncountyaudubon.com or find them on Facebook.

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