



# ***WEST MARIN WILD***

**By Jeff Miller**

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One birdy...two birdies...three birdies...

Since I wanted to stay home near the nest rather than fly the coop for my winter holiday vacation, I puffed up my feathers and volunteered for four different Christmas Bird Counts in the Bay Area. The Christmas Bird Count is an annual volunteer avian census that gathers information on winter bird populations for scientific use.

Through the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was thought great sport to hold a Christmas "side hunt" for birds, wherein a passel of boozed up half-wits and dotards would compete with a covey of cretins and lummoxes to see who was manly enough to shoot the most birds. That changed (somewhat) on Christmas Day 1900, when ornithologist Frank Chapman of the fledgling Audubon Society proposed counting our feathered friends instead of killing them, launching the Christmas Bird Count. Now each winter, flocks of overly caffeinated volunteers in cliché birding attire flit and flicker throughout different fifteen mile diameter "count circles" along assigned migration routes, their hawk-like eyes picking out birdies big and small to be identified and tallied.

I started off my avian blitzkrieg with the Point Reyes bird count, spending a day carousing about Muddy Hollow south of Drake's Estero with my bird teacher Lisa. Highlights were an American bittern (a stealthy heron that freezes motionless with its bill pointed skyward, blending into the reeds), encounters with herds of tule elk, and an impressive bobcat that emerged dripping wet from the estero carrying a duck in its mouth. The next day I migrated to the East Bay for the Niles bird count along Alameda Creek in Fremont. The following week I winged it up to the North Bay to kayak the Petaluma River looking in vain for black rails, small elusive marsh birds that at least may have identified and counted me – one floating bird geek, check!

On December 29<sup>th</sup> I covered the home turf in Bolinas for the Southern Marin count. Under the wing of the Marin Audubon Society ([www.marinaudubon.org](http://www.marinaudubon.org)), birders have flocked to the Southern Marin count for the past 32 years. The Southern Marin count circle is usually in the top 20 nationally in numbers of birds and species seen, and rural West Marin generally makes the top ten.

This year two dozen teams of citizen scientists fluffed their feathers and braved the elements to census 23 separate areas within a southern Marin circle ranging from Terra Linda to Sausalito, Bolinas to San Pablo Bay. 14 of us in six teams logged 33 miles (much of it by foot and bike) covering the Bolinas count area. We pished and chirped around town, finding 140 birds species and over 13,000 birds, ten species of raptors, six different woodpeckers, and two kinds of lattés. I bicycled around Bolinas Lagoon, downtown, and the Mesa count area with talented local birder and illustrator Keith Hansen, pedaling soggy but happy through the drizzle and mist geekin' hard on birds.

The best birds of the Bolinas count area were a white-fronted goose on the Mesa (seen only 8 times in our area since 1978) and a shorebird called the wandering tattler at Seadrift (only the 4<sup>th</sup> time this species has been recorded here since 1978). My personal favorite birds were the black-crowned night herons hunkered down in the cattails at the sewage ponds, the dark merlin we saw streaking across the sky over downtown Bolinas, and two American pipits, a new bird for me and the 300<sup>th</sup> bird species for my life list. I'll be back next year and plan on birding mildly inebriated with a flask of fine scotch. We need 16-20 people to cover the Bolinas area thoroughly, so come on out next December.

*West Marin Wild* is a sporadic column on the wildlife and natural world of West Marin. Contact me at P.O. Box 111, Bolinas.