

DECEMBER 19, 2022

Brown creepers, golden crowned kinglets and tufted titmice appear for annual bird count

By **Eric Gorton, senior contributor**
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By **Eric Gorton, senior contributor**

Bill Benish describes brown creepers as odd little birds and he means no disrespect.

About the size of chickadees, brown creepers cling tightly to tree bark and only climb up.

"They use their slightly curved bill to probe little spots in bark and as they do that they wiggle their body," Benish explained while pointing out a few of them high up in trees in Bridgewater's Wildwood Park on Saturday. "They never go down (when on a tree), which is kind of a weird thing. The only way they go down is to fly."



Benish was joined by two other volunteers who went to the park to count the creepers, and any other birds they spotted, while participating in the annual Christmas Bird Count.

Started in 1900, the Christmas Bird Count has become the longest-running community science bird project in the U.S. It takes place every year from Dec. 14 to January 5 in the U.S., Canada and many other countries in the Western hemisphere as a way of promoting conservation by counting, rather than hunting, birds.



Birders from each location in the count work in a circular area 15 miles wide during a 24-hour period. Participants conducting the count in Harrisonburg and Rockingham County are responsible for tallying birds in an area that is centered between Briery Branch and Montezuma and includes the southwest side of Harrisonburg along with Dayton, Bridgewater, Clover Hill, Fawley Springs, Mount Clinton and Hinton. The circle, which was established in the 1950s, extends into a section of northern Augusta County that includes Centerville and Mount Solon. At least 30 additional volunteers participated in this year's Rockingham County count.

Benish has been the official compiler for Harrisonburg-Rockingham County for the past 13 years and always looks forward to spotting creepers and a host of other birds that only visit the Shenandoah Valley as they head south for the winter, along with the birds that stay year-round.

Even for experienced birders, creepers can be a little difficult to spot. They don't make much noise and their coloring makes them blend right in.



To be clear, none of these have been brown creepers.

"The joke with those is that they're just moving tree bark, they're not real birds," said Dakota Kobler, who was participating in her first Christmas Bird Count, but not her first bird count.

A biologist with a consulting firm in Springfield, Illinois, the Grottoes native said the other counts she has done have been work-related and that she was enjoying the more relaxed pace of the Christmas count.

Randy Cline of Harrisonburg also participated in the count with Benish and Kobler. A member of the Rockingham Bird Club, he has been participating in the count the past eight years.



Statistics from Saturday's count won't be available for a couple weeks. Benish, a member of the Rockingham Bird Club and the Augusta Bird Club, participated in Augusta County's count on Sunday.

He said preparing the local numbers for submission to the Audubon Society involves some follow-up with other counters, especially if rare birds are counted. In addition to numbers of birds and species, counters include information on how long they spend on foot, how long they spend in vehicles and how far they travel on foot and in vehicles. The count also will include numbers from people who participate from their homes, tallying birds that visit their feeders.

In addition seeing creepers in Wildwood Park, the group spotted mallard ducks, great blue heron, blue jays, black vultures, turkey vultures, Canada geese, kinglets, tufted titmice and a few others before heading off to Hone Quarry to continue the count.



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Eric has worked as a media relations coordinator in University Communications at James Madison University since March 2005. He started working in public relations with the Virginia Department of Transportation in September 2000. Before that, he worked as a reporter and editor at the Daily News-Record from 1987 to 1999 and as a Web content developer for SEI, Inc. in Harrisonburg from 1998-2000.

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