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TPWD Gives Christmas Bird Count Info.

The annual winter birding competition is getting ready to start as 50,000 birders prepare to survey their favorite winter birding spots across the Nation.

These Christmas Bird Counts are annual early winter surveys of 15-mile diameter circular areas.

The data are given to the National Audubon Society, who stores and uses them to monitor avian population trends across the nation.

Christmas Bird Counts started over 100 years ago.

Prior to 1900, people engaged in a holiday tradition known as the Christmas "Side Hunt." They would choose sides and go a field with their guns, and whoever brought in the biggest pile of feathered (and furred) quarry won.

Conservation was in its beginning stages around the turn of the 20th century, and many observers and scientists were becoming concerned about declining bird populations. Beginning on Christmas Day 1900, ornithologist Frank Chapman, an early officer in the then budding Audubon Society, proposed a new holiday tradition: a "Christmas Bird Census" that would count birds in the holidays rather than hunt them.

So began the Christmas Bird Count.

Today, over 2,000 counts are held in United States and 100 in Texas between December 14 and Jan. 5, each winter.

Birders conducting the surveys like to make them competitive and try to locate more species than other counts in their area, state and nation.

The Texas Coast is blessed with the highest early winter diversity of birds in the Nation. Matagorda County - Mad Island Marsh near Matagorda, Corpus Christi, Freeport and Guadalupe River Delta - McFaddin Family Marshes near Tivoli traditionally produces the top counts in the Nation.

Other popular Christmas Bird Counts along the Coast are several Houston counts, San Bernard National Wildlife Refuge, Brazos Bend State Park, Atwater's Greater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge, Aransas National Wildlife Refuge and Rockport.

The birders may start their survey as early as midnight, with most starting just before dawn to count night birds like owls and rails.

They drive the roads and walk all likely areas that might support unusual birds.

While the count is a survey of all of the birds of the area, realistically the birders only have time to try to locate all of the species in the large areas in which they bird.

Many of the "rarest species" found during the counts are not endangered species, but species that have strayed outside of their normal ranges or neotropical migrants that are late in leaving Texas for their winter homes in the tropics.

Species like W. Grebe, who strays to the Coast from the West; Masked Duck, which is a tropical species that occasionally wanders into Texas or Louisiana and Waterthrush, which is a Neotropical migrant that is not expected to winter in Texas, are prize birds to be found during the survey.

The survey concludes with a countdown where birders gather after sundown to report all of the species found during the day.

Some of these count-downs



are very country-oriented, like the one held during a cook-out under the live oaks on the Womack Ranch near McFaddin for the Guadalupe River Delta-McFaddin Family Ranches count, or more formal like the banquet held at the Wadsworth Community Center for the Matagorda County - Mad Island Marsh count.

Each team of birders holds back their rarest find of the day until they make a report to the

group to bring maximum attention to their success.

Some Christmas Bird Counts will give special recognition for the team of birders finding the most unusual species.

For more information about Christmas Bird Counts, visit <http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc/>.

If you wish to contact your local biologist for assistance, check the Web site at <http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/wildlifebiologists>.

Caution Urged For ATV Riders

By Sally Robinson and
Keith Bly,
UT Medical Branch
Galveston

They can entice even the most careful of people.

Their shiny bodies, crouched low to the ground, with their wide tires and handlebars, promise a fun, adventurous, thrilling ride through uncharted territory. They're all-terrain vehicles, and, while they can be fun, they can be the source of pain, injury and even death.

The most recent numbers by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission show that in 2003, almost 750 people died because of ATV injuries.

The following year, another 136,000 people went through emergency rooms with ATV-related injuries.

With ridership numbers climbing to more than 6 million a year, it doesn't seem it will get better.

Perhaps the most telling information about the numbers related to ATV deaths and injuries are that one-third of all deaths involved riders younger than 16 years of age.

That number has prompted the safety commission to advise that children and teens should stay off ATVs.

We agree with this advisory and don't think children or young teens have any business riding ATVs, alone or as passengers.

However, if you must, we'd like to share some useful information with you about ATV safety.

First: An ATV safety course is necessary for you and your children.

There are several hands-on programs in the area to teach you how to ride an ATV safely and will help you enhance your riding experience.

Second: (and we're sure you'll learn this in the course), is to protect yourself with the appropriate safety gear.

A U.S. Department of Transportation-approved helmet, long pants, long-sleeve shirts, over-the-ankle boots, goggles and gloves are necessary to stay safe.

Third: pick the appropriate vehicle.

They come in all shapes, sizes and levels of power.

It's crucial to select the one that best fits the rider's age and riding ability.

Fourth: don't ride ATVs on paved roads.

They were built for off-road trails.

No, dirt roads don't count.

A study conducted in a Columbus, Ohio, emergency room during the course of a year-and-a-half and released late last year, enumerates some of the injuries they saw.

Injuries such as skull fractures, spine fractures and liver lacerations were just some of those listed in the report.

The vast majority of riders in the study, 86 percent, were younger than 16.

Don't let one of your children become one of these alarming numbers.

Do your research and take the necessary precautions.

A great place to start is www.atvsafety.org.

Agriculture Market Recap Given

For the week ending Dec. 6, feeder cattle price trends at Texas auctions were mixed, with sales early in the week steady to \$6 lower per hundredweight (cwt) and later sales steady to \$6 higher.

Fed cattle prices declined by \$3 per cwt in response to lower beef prices and concerns that demand will decline in a weaker economy.

Cotton and grain markets closed the week at their lowest levels in more than two years as a strong U.S. dollar, slumping export demand and concerns about the economy continue to push commodity markets lower.

As for futures markets, feeder cattle, finished cattle, cotton, wheat, corn and lumber all finished the week lower.

Parts of the Plains and East Texas recorded up to one inch of rain during the week, while the rest of the state reported little or no precipitation.

Topsoil moisture remains in adequate to short supply in most locations.

Winter wheat seeding is nearing completion with the emerged crop reported to be in mostly fair to good condition.

Cotton harvest advanced to 81 percent complete, slightly behind the normal pace.

Grain sorghum and peanut harvests are almost finished.

Pastures were reported to be in mostly poor to fair condition and needing rain in most areas.

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