

The Great Backyard Bird Count

Sarah Colman

General Curator

In honor of the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA), National Geographic has deemed 2018 “The Year of the Bird.” The MBTA is one of the most impactful pieces of legislation ever enacted for wildlife in our country and has saved the lives of countless numbers of our feathered friends. In honor of The Year of the Bird, we will be highlighting our bird residents at the zoo as well as the wild birds that share our world in Zoo to You articles, keeper chats, and bird-themed awareness days throughout the year. We will also be sharing ways that you can help birds and contribute to science that helps us understand birds better than ever before.

Many birds have adaptations that let them perform some of the most amazing feats in nature. Emperor penguins live and breed at temperatures of 40 below zero and males survive without food for two months while incubating a single egg. The humble arctic tern makes the longest migration of any animal on Earth, flying around 44,000 miles each year as it migrates between the North and South poles. As terns live an average of 30 years, this means that an arctic tern will fly roughly 1.5 million miles in its lifetime, enough for three trips to the moon and back. Birds have astonishing eyesight, able to see not only great distances, but in an incredible range of colors, far more than humans can see. In addition to the normal receptors that humans have for detecting red, green, and blue, birds have additional receptors that allow them to see into the ultraviolet spectrum, which humans cannot do. They also possess more numerous receptors than humans, meaning they see a far more nuanced range of color shades than we can see. Some birds of prey, such as kestrels, have been found to be able to track their prey not only by actually seeing them, but also by following UV light reflections from the urine trails of whatever they are hunting. Many species of songbirds found in our backyards possess the remarkable ability to put the different halves of their brains to sleep at different times, allowing one half to be active and processing information while the other half rests and recharges. Crows, magpies, and ravens can make tools, solve complex problems, and have some degree of self-awareness.

Our knowledge of birds and their unique abilities is expanding all the time. Many of our discoveries about birds come from data collected by everyday people like you and me. Anyone can contribute to our body of knowledge about birds by spending just a few minutes a day observing the birds in their

own backyard. This data is used by scientists to track the movements of birds and determine the ranges and land use of bird species, among other things. This year, we encourage you to take a few minutes to observe your backyard birds and take part in the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC). The GBBC is sponsored by the National Audubon Society and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and produces the largest spontaneous “snapshot” of global bird populations of any single bird counting event during the year. This year the GBBC takes place from February 16-19. Participants are encouraged to watch birds for at least 15 minutes during one or more of the days of the GBBC and record their sightings at gbbc.birdcount.org/. You can even photograph the birds you see and enter the GBBC Photo Contest sponsored by the National Audubon Society. If you don’t know how to identify birds, but still want to be a part of the GBBC, there’s an app for that! Apps like Merlin Bird ID, eBird Mobile, and Audubon Birds make it fun and easy to identify birds. During the GBBC, we will be showcasing birds at the zoo through discovery carts and informative talks about our bird residents. Our dedicated bird caretakers will be out and about to share their knowledge with you and showcase their passion for birds. Be sure to check the zoo’s Facebook page for information about what to expect the weekend of the GBBC.

We hope that you will join us this year in celebrating The Year of the Bird. Here at the zoo, we look forward to sharing ways you can help and enjoy birds all year long, both around the world and right in our own backyards. For more information about The Year of the Bird and how to help our feathered friends, you can visit the National Audubon Society at www.audubon.org/yearofthebird.