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Your Contribution to Science

Ruth Heil

Have you ever wondered if your sharp birding skills or keen nature observations would be useful to science? Whether you're spotting regular visitors at a backyard feeder or you found an oddity on your last field excursion, if you're dedicated to accurate identification, the answer is "yes".

Bird watching may be a hobby, but when you document your sightings, you create raw data useful for studying our world. Called citizen science, public contributions to scientific research are gaining both popularity and respect.

To a scientist, data is crucial. Factual information must be collected from the "field" in order to begin answering questions about what is happening there. The questions might be about a broad and serious topic such as the consequences of habitat loss or a simple curiosity about a specific species' habits. No scientist can be everywhere at once, so they value input from folks who are already out there. Especially useful is the input from someone like a tenacious, forever-watching, checklist-keeping Audubon member.

Additionally, when scientists try to protect our environment, they benefit from an engaged public. Citizen science marries research with interest in order to raise a better understanding for everyone involved.

Arguably the oldest example of a citizen-science project is the Christmas Bird Count. What began on Christmas day in 1900 as a campaign to count birds instead of hunt them has since grown into a source of evidence the Environmental Protection

Agency is using to address climate change.

Another example began in 1998 when the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society launched the Great Backyard Bird Count. This annual project provides a four-day snapshot of the distribution and abundance of birds around the globe in February. Researchers compare checklists from more than 100,000 citizens, past and present, to establish patterns of diversity and population. Then knowledge about weather, disease, habitat, and more are overlaid, and conservation and regulation strategies are developed.

Some projects are open all year long. Take for instance the study of seasonal changes, called phenology. Using funding from her Audubon TogetherGreen Fellows award, Diane Husic, Ph.D, Chair and Professor at the Department of Biological Sciences at Moravian College, launched the Eastern Pennsylvania Phenology Project out of the Lehigh Gap Nature Center (lgnc.org/research/phenology) in 2010. In need of further support to expand the program, Husic is eager to engage more folks. In the meantime, the past data remains valuable, especially to those studying climate change. Participants have documented information on a variety of species, including 45 targeted details such as the bloom times of the Common Milkweed plant, the emergence of the firefly, and the spawning of the American Shad.



As Husic said, "Besides collecting data, a major goal of the Eastern PA project was to provide a means to talk about climate change 'through discovery' and to engage teachers and classrooms."

It's known that young people make particularly good citizen scientists because they are more sensitive to the changes around them. And when children are encouraged to explore, they have a

better chance of landing a career that suits their interests.

Meanwhile, the practice of employing citizens of all ages to study nature has matured and spread. There are now citizen-science projects that monitor water quality, identify deformed frogs, observe the dwindling populations of Monarch Butterfly, and more. The public's research has made its way into the same peer-reviewed scientific literature coveted by legislators and doctors.

For those interested, here are a few tips:

- Volunteer with a reputable organization you trust and like, one that shares its data for the common good.
- Contribute to a project that suits your style (rigid and formal or relaxed and simple).
- Study a subject that is convenient or interesting.
- Be as accurate as possible. Guesses are not data; however, analysts take potential for error into consideration at all levels.
- Take advantage of training when offered.

The birds that caught our attention when we were children have become a part of our lives in ways that are difficult to describe. They call us outside. They dare us to find them. With only a few steps more, our bird watching hobby can contribute to the stuff of encyclopedias: world knowledge.

For more information on citizen science:

Birds: www.audubon.org/conservation/science or www.birds.cornell.edu/page.aspx?pid=1664

Butterflies: www.nababis.org or www.monarchwatch.org

Ladybugs: www.lostladybug.org

Amphibian and Reptiles: www.paherps.com/pars-launches

Astronomy: science.nasa.gov/citizen-scientists

Water Quality: www.usawaterquality.org/volunteer

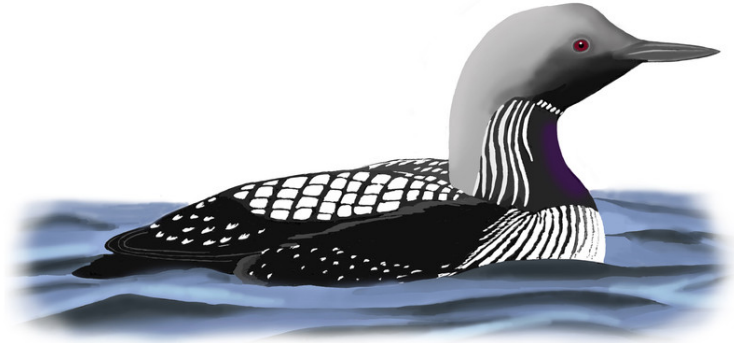
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Pacific Loon, by Dr. George C. West

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