

# Where are the Birds?

## Abundance and diversity in an urban schoolyard



### Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- identify and count local birds
- follow a scientific protocol
- characterize habitat structure
- enter data into a spreadsheet/database
- analyze and collect data
- formulate questions relating patterns in bird diversity and abundance in the urban environment
- design simple studies to answer their questions
- determine what affects the distribution and abundance of urban bird species

### Author:

Ecology Explorers Education team

### Time:

min time for survey at two sites: 50-60 min.

### Grade Level:

5-12

### Standards

#### AZ Science Strands

Inquiry, Social Perspectives, Life Sciences

#### NGSS - Core Ideas

Earth materials and systems; Biogeology; Human impacts on Earth systems; Information Processing; Interdependent relationships in ecosystems; Ecosystem dynamics, functioning, and resilience; Biodiversity and humans  
*Specific AZ, Common Core, and NGSS standards on page 3.*

### Background:

The Sonoran Desert has some of the most diverse native plant and animal species of any desert in the world. Many birds are uniquely adapted to living here and they are part of food webs that include animals and plants that also are adapted to desert living. Bird researchers have found over 50 bird species in the Phoenix metropolitan area. The most numerous of these bird species are the: House Finch, Starling, House Sparrow, Mourning Dove, Inca Dove, Pigeon (Rock Dove) and Great-tailed Grackle. These birds occupy different habitats and microclimates within the urban environment. Some urban bird species are non-natives that have taken up residence in desert cities (Starlings, House Sparrows, and Rock doves are native to Europe). Vegetation planted by people and artificial irrigation provide food and shelter for these birds

Scientists from the Central Arizona—Phoenix Long-Term Ecological Research (<http://caplter.asu.edu>) project are studying the impact of this urbanization on bird communities. The goals of the CAP LTER bird project are (1) to document the changes in avian richness and abundance over time and space, and (2) to determine the biotic and/or abiotic and socio-economic and/or political factors that cause these changes to occur. To accomplish these goals, the CAP LTER scientists have been conducting bird surveys as part of their long-term monitoring (<https://caplter.asu.edu/research/long-term-monitoring/>). CAP LTER ecologists use Point Counts to survey the bird. During each session, each site is visited by 3 birders who count all birds seen or heard for 15 minutes. The CAP LTER scientists also use satellite images, high aerial photography, and vegetative ground surveys to study the effects of landscape structure on avian populations. Interesting results from various CAP LTER bird studies can be found in the research highlights (<https://caplter.asu.edu/research/research-highlights/>).

### Vocabulary:

**point count** - a method of to census organisms within a standard radius from a random point for a standard amount of time

**bird distribution** - the pattern of different types or species of birds in a landscape

**bird abundance** - the total number of birds surveyed

### Advanced Preparation:

Students should practice identifying birds before doing bird counts. Learning to identify silhouettes, size, beak shape and habits are key characteristics for identifying birds. Interactive bird identification games are available at <https://ecologyexplorers.asu.edu/get-started/interactive-games/>

### Materials:

- meter tape or meter stick and string
- location markers
- timer
- binoculars (useful but not necessary)
- data sheets and student handouts
- pencils and clipboards

## Recommended Procedure:

### Engagement:

- 1) Play bird ID games or show photos to initiate a class discussion and generate a research question. Ask students: What is important for birds? How are birds important to the broader ecosystem? How would you expect birds to respond to the schoolyard habitat?
- 2) Take a walk outside or review from memory the various microclimates in your schoolyard. Ask students to list different locations and their boundaries, keeping in mind the 20m radius you will use for the survey.  
  
What is different about each of these locations: vegetation, built structures, ground cover, sun/shade, irrigation?
- 3) Choose at least two different locations in your schoolyard to conduct the survey, such as the middle of a lawn, near trees and bushes, near asphalt, near the edge of the property, etc. Assign a number and name to each site. Encourage the class to consider other factors that might affect your survey (e.g. maintenance activities, watering schedule, class schedule, high activity or traffic areas). Have students describe their sites on the Student Worksheet - Bird Point Count Survey Design.
- 4) Decide on a time of day to do the survey and keep it consistent. You may survey several days or weeks in a row and alternate the survey time on different days. If possible, several classes can survey at different times of day or on different days. (Note: to enter your data into the CAP LTER database, you will need to establish the habitat description first and census at least one site, twice per week, for 4 consecutive weeks).
- 5) Ask students to carefully state their questions and predictions. Record these on the Student Worksheet - Bird Point Count Survey Design.

For example: Will there be a difference in the types of and number of birds between site 1 and 2? In the morning? In the afternoon?

(e.g. We predict there will be fewer birds at both locations in the afternoon when it is hotter, but overall there will be more birds at the grassy site than at the concrete site.)

### Exploration:

- 6) You may divide students into two groups to survey two sites simultaneously. Establish a random point at each location and mark out a circle with a 20-meter radius from the points. (You can drop a small rock backward

over your shoulder and wherever it lands, that is your point). Make sure there are no large obstructions within the circle. For example, if there is a block wall in the area, position the circle so the it is near the perimeter of the circle. If you just don't have enough space for a 20-meter radius circle, then you need to note the size of the study area on the data sheet.

- 7) Complete a habitat description for each of your point count sites. Record your findings on the Student Worksheet - Bird Point Count Habitat Description.

### The following technique can be used to estimate the land cover in your 20m radius (40m diameter) circular study area:

- Take two pieces of string and divide the plot into 4 equal sections, so the strings cross in the middle.
  - Mark the string every four meters. Start marking the first string at meter zero, and the second string at meter 1. (This staggers the points along the strings to provide 20 total marked points)
  - At each point place a meter stick. In the first column of the data table, record the type of cover beneath your feet and less than 0.15m (ground cover). Also, in the appropriate column, record any vegetation that is between 0.15m to 1.5m tall (shrubs) and any which is taller than 1.5m (tree). Only write down the type of land cover that is at that point and touching your meter stick. The land cover type can be "building" or "cement" as well as plants.
- 8) For each type of cover, add the number of times it was recorded, divide by the total number of points and multiply by 100. For example if you recorded "shrubs" at 5 of the points and there were 20 points, then shrubs would be 25% of the land cover ( $5/20 \times 100$ ).
  - 9) Observe the cloud cover and measure the air temperature at each survey point (center of the circle) and record on the Student Worksheet - Bird Point Count Data Collection.
  - 10) Conduct the point count. Spread students around the circle and allow some time to pass after this disturbance to the area. Select 1 observer and 1 recorder. Count all birds that enter the circle for 10 min. Count each bird only once. Use the Student Worksheet - Bird Point Count Data Collection to record the number of individuals from each species that you have seen. (Although all students can observe and record birds on their own data sheets, the official data should be collected by only one observer to avoid over counting. It may be interesting to compare data afterward and

discuss differences among observers)

### Explanation:

- 11) Compare your species lists for each site. Ask students if they can see any obvious differences. How might they explain those differences?
- 11) Sum the total numbers of each species found at each site at each time of day from all surveys. Use the table on Student Worksheet - Bird Count Data Analysis to summarize the results.

### Expansion:

- 12) Have students make bar graphs of the compiled data to look for patterns between times of day and sites. Which birds were more abundant at which sites? Why might this be?

- 13) To submit data to the CAP LTER database and compare to other school sites go to: <https://ecologyexplorers.asu.edu/our-ecosystem/ecology-explorers-data/>

### Evaluation:

Students will participate in all activities and complete the worksheets and graphs.

### Extensions:

- Have students read the article “The Good Life of Birds” by James Hathaway in the ASU Chain Reaction magazine volume 4. [http://chainreactionkids.org/files/issues/4/chreact4\\_p16\\_17.pdf](http://chainreactionkids.org/files/issues/4/chreact4_p16_17.pdf)
- Ask students to discuss the article in small groups and summarize the results. What did the researchers discover? Which variables did they control in their study? How? What hypotheses did the researchers propose to explain their results? Ask students to generate their own hypotheses that could explain how people's lifestyles might affect bird distribution in this way. How would they design a new study to test their best hypothesis?
- Students may pick one bird species they observed and research it further to produce a written and/or verbal report on the birds' natural history (habits, range, prey, predators). Include evidence and inferences about how the bird species interacts with humans and how its life might be different in the city vs. the desert.

### Standards

#### Arizona Science Standards

S1-C1-GR5-8-PO1  
S1-C1-GR5-6-PO1-2  
S1-C2-GR5-8-PO1

S1-C3-GR5-8 PO1-4  
S1-C4-GR5-8-PO3, PO5  
S3-C1-GR7-PO1  
S4-C1-GR6-PO1  
S4-C3-GR6-PO1-2  
S4-C3-GR7-PO1-6  
S4-C4-GR8-PO1, PO4-6  
S1-C1-GRHS- PO1-4  
S1-C2-GRHS-PO1, PO4-5  
S1-C3-GRHS-PO1-2  
S1-C4-GRHS-PO1-4  
S3-C1-GRHS-PO1-5  
S4-C3-GRHS-PO1-3  
S4-C4-GRHS-PO4  
S4-C5-GRHS-PO3-5

### NGSS Core Ideas

ESS2.A: Earth materials and systems  
ESS2.E: Biogeology  
ESS3.C: Human impacts on Earth systems  
LS1.A: Structure and function  
LS1.D: Information Processing  
LS2.A: Interdependent relationships in ecosystems  
LS2.C: Ecosystem dynamics, functioning, and resilience  
LS4.D: Biodiversity and humans

### NGSS Practices

Asking questions  
Developing and using models  
Planning and carrying out investigations  
Analyzing and interpreting data  
Using mathematics and computational thinking  
Constructing explanations  
Engaging in argument from evidence  
Obtaining, evaluating, and communication information

### NGSS Crosscutting Concepts

Patterns  
Cause and effect  
Scale, proportion and quantity  
Systems and system models  
Energy and matter; Flows, cycles, and conservation  
Structure and function  
Stability and Change

### Common Core/ELA Literacy

RST7: Integration of knowledge and Ideas  
WHTS1: Write Arguments  
WTS7: Research/investigate to answer a focused question  
SL1: Comprehension and Collaboration  
SL2: Integrate oral information

### Common Core/Mathematics

Domains:  
Number and Quantity

Measurement and Data  
Statistics and Probability

Math Practices:

2. Reason abstractly and quantitatively.
4. Model with mathematics.
5. Use appropriate mathematic tools strategically.

# Student Worksheet

## Bird Point Count Survey Design



**Sites :**

**Site 1 Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Location:** Write a brief description of where your site is located. (i.e. SW corner of playground):

**Description:** Write a description of your site so that a visitor to your school would be able to find your point count site

**Site 2 Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Location:** Write a brief description of where your site is located:

**Description:** Write a description of your site so that a visitor to your school would be able to find your point count site:

**Scientific Question:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Predictions:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Factors to consider when collecting data:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

# Student Worksheet

## Bird Point Count Habitat Description



### Data Table for Describing Land Cover in your Point Count Circle

Point	0-0.15m				0.15-1.5m Shrubs	> 1.5m Tree Canopy
	Lawn	Gravel or Soil	Pavement or Building	Other Vegetation		
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						
7						
8						
9						
10						
11						
12						
13						
14						
15						
16						
17						
18						
19						
20						

**Totals:**

Lawn \_\_\_\_\_ x 100 = \_\_\_\_\_ %  
20

Other Vegetation \_\_\_\_\_ x 100 = \_\_\_\_\_ %  
20

Gravel/Soil \_\_\_\_\_ x 100 = \_\_\_\_\_ %  
20

Pavement/Building \_\_\_\_\_ x 100 = \_\_\_\_\_ %  
20

Shrubs \_\_\_\_\_ x 100 = \_\_\_\_\_ %  
20

Tree Canopy \_\_\_\_\_ x 100 = \_\_\_\_\_ %  
20

# Student Worksheet

## Bird Point Count Data Collection



Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

Site ID: \_\_\_\_\_

Observer's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Survey: \_\_\_\_\_

Comments/Observations: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Cloud Cover: none scattered overcast      Temperature: \_\_\_\_\_ °F

Start Time: \_\_\_\_\_:\_\_\_\_\_ AM PM      End Time: \_\_\_\_\_:\_\_\_\_\_ AM PM

Species Name	Tally Number

# Student Worksheet

## Bird Point Count Data Analysis



Species Name	Site	Comments	Total Number

### Conclusions (write answer on back)

- Were some birds more abundant at one site than another? Why might this be?
  
- How did the land cover differ from one site to the other?
  
- Why is it important to study birds? What do they tell us about our urban ecosystem?



# Student Worksheet

## Graphs



Y-axis= \_\_\_\_\_



X-axis= \_\_\_\_\_