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**Abstract:** The article describes an event called Bioblitz, in which the public gathers to learn about biodiversity at various locations in North America, Australia, and Europe. Designed as part rapid biological survey, part public outreach event, BioBlitzes bring a talented group of scientists and naturalists to a local, often urban, community to compile a snapshot of the biodiversity present there. These jocular gatherings, whether organized by individual scientists or sponsored by museums, benefit the scientists who participate, the managers of the parks where the BioBlitzes are conducted, and the families--particularly the kids--who attend. Scientists work to identify various species at the Connecticut BioBlitz, organized by Ellen Censky, director of the Connecticut State Museum of Natural History at the University of Connecticut-Storrs.

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### **BioBlitz: Getting into Backyard Biodiversity**

How often does the public get to see scientists having fun doing science? And what if everyone who came to watch, young or old, went away with a much better understanding of biodiversity? It happens every year in many North American locations and is even beginning to take off in Australia and Europe. It's called a BioBlitz.

Designed as part rapid biological survey, part public outreach event, BioBlitzes bring a talented group of scientists and naturalists to a local, often urban, community to compile a snapshot of the biodiversity present there. These jocular gatherings, whether organized by individual scientists or sponsored by museums, benefit the scientists who participate, the managers of the parks where the BioBlitzes are conducted, and the families--particularly the kids--who attend.

What happens at the Connecticut BioBlitz, organized by Ellen Censky, director of the Connecticut State Museum of Natural History at the University of Connecticut-Storrs (UConn), is a good example. Over 100 scientists work from 3:00 p.m. on a Friday to 3:00 p.m. the next day counting as many species as they can in a designated area. At 10:00

a.m. on Saturday, the event opens to the public with organized activities and a staging area where people can see what has been found and talk with scientists while they continue identifying species. There are also displays on biodiversity, put together by the museum and nature-oriented organizations, explaining what biodiversity is and why it's important.

"The good thing about Connecticut is it's a tiny state with a lot of universities," Censky says. "It's conducive to BioBlitzes because it can draw together so many specialists from a variety of disciplines."

"For plants, the number [of species] we find depends more on the number of botanists in the field than on diversity per se," says Kent Holsinger, a botanist in the Ecology and Evolutionary Biology Department at UConn and one of the specialists who participates in the Connecticut BioBlitz each year. "BioBlitzes are not intended to be exhaustive inventories. They have been extremely successful because they are a lot of fun to do, to get out in the field and find out what's out there. To see how much diversity there is in urban parks is really amazing."

The first Connecticut BioBlitz was in a park in a very poor neighborhood in Hartford, "the sort of place no one thinks anything is living," Censky explains. "Then you find more than a thousand species living there, and people are impressed by that." Both Censky and Holsinger remember one 8- or 9-year-old boy who came that year. He spent the entire time looking over the shoulder of a parasitologist who was working on a roadkill, counting all the parasite species she could find. At the end he enthusiastically told the scientists, "That's what I want to do when I grow up!"

That first year in Connecticut about 500 people showed up; last year 3000 people came. "The number depends on the community that is hosting the event and how well they've gotten the word out," Censky says. "It's the kids who really get into the activity. They may learn about it at school and then bring their families to the event."

"We provide data to park managers if we find rare or endangered species, or invasive species, to make sure they're aware of that," Holsinger says. Last year, in Norwich, Connecticut, they could compare their flora count with one from the late 1800s or early 1900s. "We found a number of plants they didn't list, all of which were introduced; one was a knotweed that is known to be invasive." They also found a population of rare orchid, which wasn't expected.

"It's become institutionalized in Connecticut," Censky says. "It's become something that's done every year, if not on a global scale, certainly on a national one." This year's BioBlitz will be held 6-7 June in New London--the first time for the Connecticut BioBlitz to be in a coastal location. (For a listing of others, see [www.mp2-pwrc.usgs.gov/blitz/blitzlink.html](http://www.mp2-pwrc.usgs.gov/blitz/blitzlink.html).)

"They do it right," says Sam Droege, a wildlife biologist at USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center and organizer of the first BioBlitz, held in Washington, DC, in 1996. "In our vision of how to put on one of these, they've done everything right: a lot of publicity, kids are involved, the press comes--they whoop it up."

"We designed it as an example of... something anyone can do: here's the model, you can run with it and modify it however you like. In fact," Droege adds, "most people don't know we started this. No one is using us in any coordinated role; it's all self-sustaining." It doesn't take a lot of money to put on a BioBlitz; it just takes someone who has time to organize the event. Most of the money is used to feed scientists and volunteers over the

24-hour period. "And the press eats it up."

"It's an opportunity to invite community leaders to come to the Friday night barbecue to meet scientists and show them what's going on," Censky says. "Local and state legislators and the local mayor are invited to the closing ceremony where the final tally is announced. It's educational at all levels, particularly for those who are our decisionmakers."

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE)

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By Cathy Lundmark

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