It was 65 years ago — when Penny Ficken was 13 — that the now retired University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee biologist and ornithologist went on her first Christmas bird count.

“I remember it well because I was in Washington, D.C., and we were leaving the country the next day,” said Ficken, who lives in Grafton.

Grafton ornithologist Penny Ficken trains binoculars on birds in her back yard. Photo by Sam Arendt

The daughter of an Army officer, Ficken moved extensively as a child, including living three years in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

“I was educated all over. I went to four high schools, including one in San Juan, and graduated from a high school in Louisiana, where I lived for only two months. That was long enough,” Ficken said.

Through all those moves, Ficken’s constant companions were her binoculars and bird field guides.

On Saturday, Dec. 17, she will have both handy as she participates in the annual Riveredge Christmas Bird Count for the Wisconsin Society of Ornithology.

After leading volunteers on field counts at Riveredge or the Cedarburg Bog for many years, Ficken now sits comfortably in her home and counts the birds that come to feed or bathe in her wooded back yard along the Milwaukee River.

“I’ll never forget the time I got hypothermia (on a Riveredge bird count hike) and decided staying home was a good idea,” Ficken said. “I got just as many species in my back yard as roaming all through the woods getting cold and wet.”

During last year’s count, she saw 13 species and 30 birds — a ring-billed gull, nine mourning doves, a screech owl, red-bellied, downy and hairy woodpeckers, a crow, three black-capped chickadees, red-breasted and two white-breasted nuthatches, three robins, a dark-eyed junco and five cardinals. She counted the birds during one hour in the morning and one hour in the afternoon.

So far this year, Ficken has spotted 81 species, including 18 types of warblers and a pine siskin.

“That’s the first one of the winter. It makes me wonder if there will be more of them,” Ficken said.

A male sharp-shinned hawk that preys on small birds is also on her list and has been hanging around for a while.

To protect themselves from the hawk, the birds come in flocks to Ficken’s feeders and birdbath, arriving about 11 a.m. They stay for an hour, then disappear until almost dark when they show up again. That’s also when bright red male cardinals come to the feeders.

“It’s adaptive behavior because the hawk hunts during the day,” Ficken said. “So those are the times I will be counting. I’ve invited a friend to join me. I don’t just count birds. I’m more interested in their behavior.”

Ficken’s black-and-white, long-haired cat named Siggy, who came from the Washington County Humane Society three years ago, will probably be on his favorite perch — a table that overlooks the feeders.

“He’ll watch them for hours. The chickadees are very used to Siggy being here,” Ficken said. “But he would rather be outside. His name was Runaway, and he lives up it.”

When she lived in the south, Ficken taught Carolina chickadees and titmice to eat from her hand.

Ficken remembers when she became fascinated with birds. She found a dead bird and insisted on taking it to her second-grade teacher.

“I remember she identified it. It was a towhee and she gave me a bird book to read. By the time I was 7, I was really into watching birds,” Ficken said. “My parents didn’t know one bird from another, but my grandmother, who lived with us, knew birds fairly well, at least the

common ones."

Her grandmother gave her a bird watching guide that she still treasures.

"My father encouraged me not just to count birds, but to watch what they were doing and to write things down," Ficken said. "I study my cat, too, and its play behavior."

Ficken said she was determined to be an ornithologist, but her mother tried to dissuade her by taking her on visits to Southern girls' schools.

"I would have nothing to do with it. I was a very determined child," she said.

Ficken earned her undergraduate and doctorate degrees from Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y. She worked at the University of Maryland for a year, then took a job at UWM, spending half her time on research and the other half teaching. She taught evolution and animal behavior.

Ficken has conducted extensive research on chickadees, nuthatches and hummingbirds, sometimes traveling to remote areas in search of birds. After retiring, she continued to travel, binoculars in hand, until back problems made it difficult for her to walk. She's been to the jungles of Costa Rica and the tundra of the Arctic and Antarctic.

Ficken is now content to watch birds from her home, photographing them through the windowpanes as she documents their behavior.

She has a squirrel-proof bird feeder that really works and a drip system for her heated birdbath. The bath sits in the middle of a teepee-like twig frame.

"I like it to look natural. The water flows over and makes pools underneath. It's the pools that are important," Ficken said. "Many birds won't bathe in the birdbath."

She also has an outdoor audio system that allows her to hear the birds. During the spring and fall migrations, she often hears a winged visitor before she spots it.

Ficken rarely is stumped by an unexpected guest, but she once consulted five bird books before she could identify an immature clay-colored sparrow.

Warblers with their late summer plumage may also require checking a bird guide, she said.

A good way to get young children interested in science is through bird watching, Ficken said.

She has her favorite birds.

“Chickadees still enthrall me, and they’re here all winter long when other birds are scarce,” Ficken said. “And hummingbirds are enchanting.