



STILL COUNTING AFTER

The Christmas Bird Count combines



Male house finch
Photo Bill Banaszewski

By Scott Stoner and
Denise Hackert-Stoner

The last bit of Thanksgiving turkey has been eaten. Santa has arrived at the local mall. Pumpkins and corn stalks have been composted, replaced by evergreens and glittering lights. Short days have become shorter yet, and our to-do lists have increased, like the minutes of darkness each night.

With all the shopping, decorating, baking, card-writing, party planning, hosting out-of-town guests and traveling on the agenda, why would a person choose to spend a precious day, from dawn until dark, counting birds? Just as importantly, are there enough birds around at this time of year to keep a group of people busy counting all day? Absolutely.

ALL THESE YEARS

holiday fun and citizen science.



The weather is often cold, windy, rainy and snowy. The count starts before dawn and ends in the dark. In spite of the challenges, it is always a great day. This red-tailed hawk was spotted at the end of a sudden storm.

Abdolhamid Elbrahimi

Bill Ivy



Black-capped chickadee

While a small group of birders might easily tally 60 species on a pleasant May morning, the challenge of attempting to count individual birds of every species within a 15-mile diameter circle in December requires a high degree of focus from the entire group. Enough focus, in fact, that for one entire day, thoughts of holiday preparations must be set aside. In other words, this is a break.

The weather is often cold, windy, sometimes rainy or snowy. The count requires an early start in pre-dawn December darkness, and ends in the dark of night. But a break it is nevertheless, in the pleasant company of like-minded birders, and in good years, a surprisingly large number of birds.

The Christmas count began in 1900 as a protest against an annual holiday bird shoot. Ornithologist Frank M. Chapman of the American Museum of Natural History, an officer in the emerging Audubon Society, organized the count in opposition to the “side hunt”—a custom of the Gilded Age in which people

got together during the holidays to shoot as many birds (and mammals) as they could find. Conservation was in its early stages then, and people were becoming concerned about declining bird populations.

This count would become a holiday tradition that continues to this day. It represents the best of “citizen science” and is the longest-running ornithological database. Starting with a few dozen counts and about as many counters across the U.S., (including several in New York State), today's count has grown into an international effort, with more than 50,000 participants from northern Alaska to Chile. Last year, more than 2,000 counts tallied nearly 70 million birds.

My first memories of the Christmas Bird Count (CBC) were as a young birder on Long Island, where I participated in the central Suffolk count with my father. Beginning at first light to search for short-eared owls, we diligently spent the days counting birds in fields, woods, and along waterways. Our last stop, at dusk, was always

a cedar grove near the marshes, in search of long-eared owls. We would stop the car along the road and “squeak” like a mouse to try to draw in one of these nocturnal hunters. Often it would work, a great cap to a fun day.

Today, there are 73 counts across New York State. Each count has a compiler responsible for recruiting people to conduct the count on its designated day, between December 14 and January 5, and for collecting and reporting the results. The count circle is typically divided into several sectors of more manageable size, each with one or more field parties who spend the entire day in that sector. Territories are typically covered by car and on foot, and occasionally by boat. Reports from feeder-watchers are also welcomed, and added into the final tally. Count participation varies from a few individuals to several dozen, ranging in age from grade-schoolers to senior citizens. After the results from the entire circle are compiled, they are provided to the National Audubon Society, which publishes the count



Short-eared owl

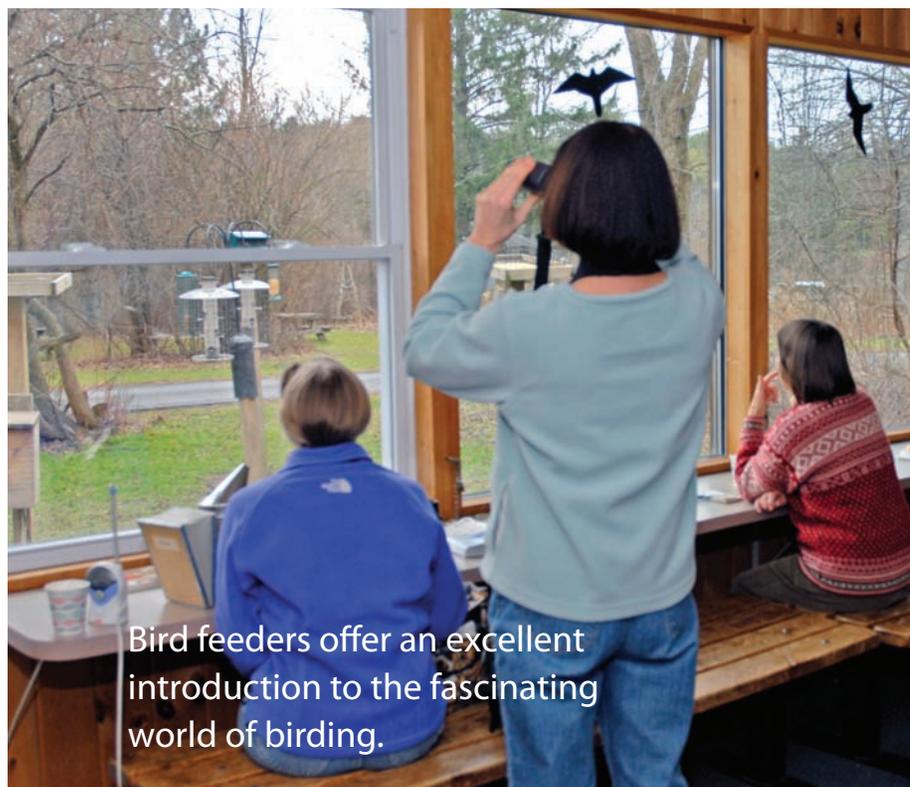
Denise Hackert-Stoner

online and in *American Birds*.

One need not be an expert birder to contribute. As a six-year-old, DEC's Jeff Mapes spotted an American coot at a reservoir while helping his father, retired *Conservationist* contributor Alan Mapes, with the Albany County count. The coot turned out to be a very unusual species for that count. Similarly, while on her first CBC, my wife spotted a northern shrike, adding an important sighting of an uncommon winter visitor.

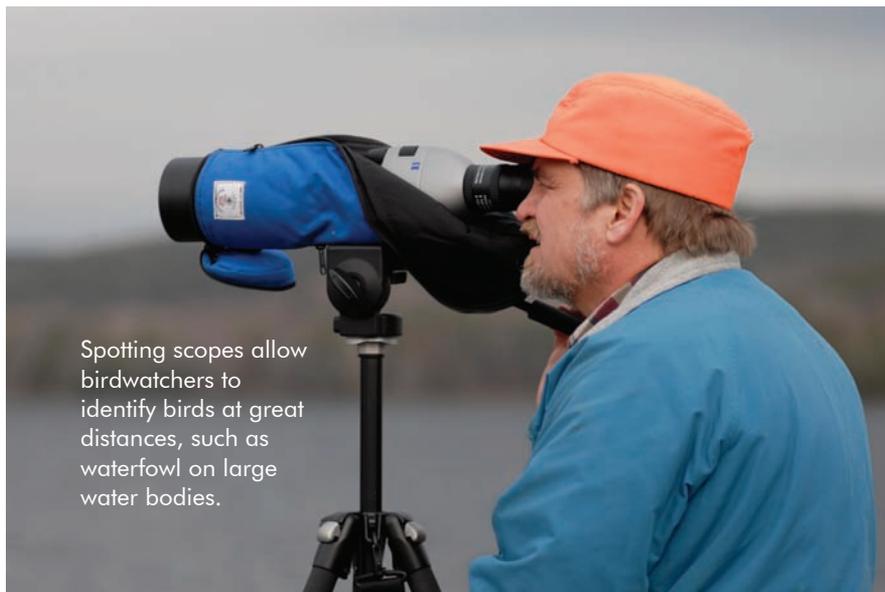
Christmas counts are social events, and nowhere is this more evident than at the compilation dinner. People often cover the same sector in successive years, and try to best their previous totals (as well as find birds that the other field parties do not...). While the group's goal is to count birds as thoroughly as possible, there is also a special effort made to find rare or new birds for that count. After dinner the real fun begins, as the participants reveal their best finds of the day.

The compiler begins by going through a list of birds that have been seen in the history of that count circle. Species by species, the compiler asks each field party



Bird feeders offer an excellent introduction to the fascinating world of birding.

Sue Shafer



Spotting scopes allow birdwatchers to identify birds at great distances, such as waterfowl on large water bodies.

Because human effort differs from year to year, miles and hours traveled on foot, by vehicle, and time spent “owling”—usually before first light or after dark, are also recorded. In addition to the list of birds of each species seen, results are presented in terms of birds-per-unit of human effort.

The data collected in these counts have certainly added to the body of ornithological knowledge. Fluctuations in numbers of wintering species, and general growth and decline of a species in an area have become evident over time by examining decades of CBC data.

CBCs can illustrate the presence of irruptive species such as certain “winter finches”—redpolls, pine siskins, crossbills and pine grosbeaks that occasionally travel south in large numbers. CBC data illustrate northward expansion of the range of species such as tufted titmouse, northern cardinal, northern mockingbird, and red-bellied woodpecker. DEC’s Larry Alden, compiler of the count in Troy, notes that CBCs “... indirectly reveal changes that have resulted from our move away from a largely agrarian society. Once-common birds of open fields like horned larks, American kestrels, and short-eared owls have become scarce as open country becomes housing development or reverts to woodland.”

Recently, an analysis of 40 years of CBC results by the Audubon Society helped to document a marked decline in bird populations, revealing an “alarming decline of many of our most common and most beloved birds.” According to Al Caccese, Executive Director of Audubon New York, “the value of the world’s largest all-volunteer bird survey increases each year,” because of its ability to demonstrate massive declines in many common birds and changes in bird ranges.

for their tally. There is often-good-natured discussion about exactly where a bird—or a flock of birds—was seen. If it was at the border of two territories, the final tally may be adjusted to ensure that the same birds are not counted twice. Occasionally, members of one party venture into another’s territory to find a particularly choice bird, which in our Christmas count, is good-naturedly referred to as “poaching.”

The tally of common birds is often interesting, as species may be present in unusual numbers, or absent altogether. For instance, one year Alan Mapes and I counted more than 3,000 American robins at the Five Rivers Environmental Education Center alone. Weather, whether lakes and reservoirs are frozen, snow cover, and the availability of natural food for the birds are just some of the factors that increase or decrease the numbers of individuals and species in a particular year. Deep snow may drive some species, such as short-eared owls, further south. Long-term trends may indicate more dire circumstances.

Weather can affect the birdwatchers as well as the birds. We have experienced bitter cold, near-frozen feet, and daylong discomfort that can be remedied only by hours spent before a fire with warm cider and hot chili. We’ve endured torrential rain that made field birding nearly impossible, and even a severe snowstorm that forced an early ending due to impassible roads.

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When the compiler has finished asking for reports of the species seen in previous years, the question then becomes, “Does anyone have any new birds to add?” Only then are a field party’s best sightings revealed.

CBC data show that cardinals have increased their northern range.

Bill Raboin



Robert Budliger, retired director of environmental education for DEC and co-author of *Birds of New York State*, cites three reasons why CBCs are important. First, to maintain continuity of the 107-year database. Second, to energize birders at all levels to come together, mentor each other, and share in the common goal of citizen science. Third, and most important, to generate publicity for birding, and in turn generate revenue for localities. From newspapers to *Sports Illustrated* to national television, publicity about CBCs draws attention to birding as

an important recreational activity.

But the best part of participating in a CBC is much more basic—spending time outdoors with friends, having fun, and watching birds.

Lifelong birder and past president of the Hudson-Mohawk Bird Club and Audubon Society of the Capital Region, **Scott Stoner** is a veteran of decades of Christmas counts. Scott answers many of the bird-related letters to the *NYS Conservationist*.

Denise Hackert-Stoner is also a veteran birder, and a past officer of the Hudson-Mohawk Bird Club. She and Scott edited the book, *Birding New York's Hudson-Mohawk Region*, published by the Hudson-Mohawk Bird Club.

Connect to Nature

Whether for the sake of science, the fun of birding, or the social experience, the CBC is for everyone. All you need is a willingness to share a day and an interest in birds.

We encourage you to take a break this holiday season. Enjoy the outdoors, feel the crisp air, listen for that first bird song to welcome the dawn, the last owl to call at night. When you return to the holiday preparations the next day, you'll be refreshed and energized.

If you are interested in learning how you can participate in your local CBC, visit www.audubon.org/bird/cbc or call 518-869-9731.

Andrew Cribb

Birding is one of the fastest growing outdoor activities. Be it city or country, there are birds to study and enjoy. Here, waterfowl fly between the Manhattan and the Brooklyn Bridge.

