

F O C U S

Christmas Bird Count

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Rich Stallcup

IT'S TEN AFTER FOUR on the morning of December 16, 2000, and we are crouched on a deer trail beneath a towering forest of Douglas fir. It is cold, and a rainy mist envelops the weeds, dampening our enthusiasm. Except for the anxious drumming of a dusky-footed woodrat, all is silent. We hoot.

Normal citizens are snuggled all warm in their beds. Gee whiz, they don't know what they're missing. We are birders, strong and true—volunteer participants in the 101st annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count (CBC) near Point Reyes.

The only answer we hear is a distant Holstein.

CBC evolution

THE CBC WAS BEGUN on Christmas Day 1900 as an alternative and protest to what was known as the Side Hunt. Side Hunt rules were simple: groups of highly armed humans would gather at selected places, divide into teams and spend the day killing as much wildlife (mostly birds) as possible. The team with the biggest pile won.

Some citizens became concerned about this mindless slaughter, and Frank M. Chapman of the fledgling National Audubon Society urged members to begin a more sensible "side count"—the CBC—where players would track down as many birds as possible but would count, not kill them. Results would be published in the Society's journal, *Bird Lore*.

Chapman and the early counters could not possibly have known the hemispheric conservation implications the CBC would eventually produce. It is the longest continuous wildlife survey undertaken ever, anywhere!

On 25 December 1900, 27 counters on 25 CBC's logged about 18,500 birds of 90 species. Count localities were mostly in or near cities in the northeastern United States and extended to Toronto, Louisiana and

California (at Pacific Grove).

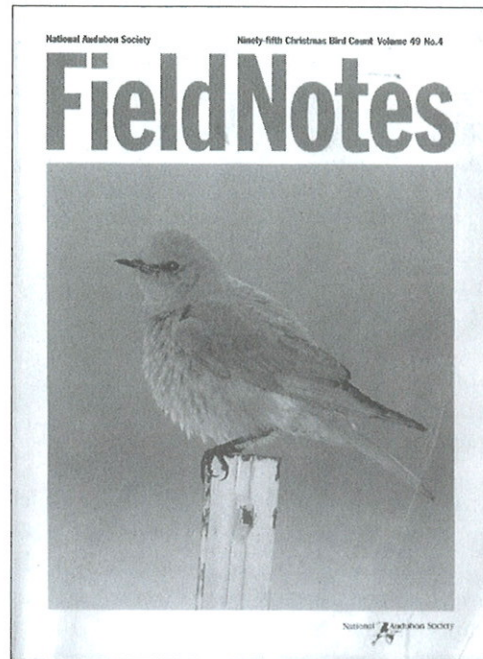
Year by year, the notion and practice of the CBC grew, and now, 100 years after that first noble start, over 50,000 volunteers participate in over 1700 well organized counts in all 50 states, all Canadian provinces, places in Latin America including the Caribbean, and some Pacific islands.

The resulting mammoth on-line database contains enormous information on bird abundance, reflecting changes in the natural environment throughout the 20th century. It tracked the decline of several species such as Trumpeter Swan, Peregrine Falcon and Bald Eagle, providing evidence for them to be listed for protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Years later, CBC data helped show their populations' recovery, leading to delisting these magnificent animals—proof that the ESA works.

Rules of the game

THROUGH TIME, as the number of counts and counters has grown, rules have been amended. Today, a CBC area is a circle 15 miles in diameter (about 177 square miles in area). In places where coverage can be thorough—some CBC's have more than 200 counters—the circle is broken into areas and areas assigned to teams. Each team aims to be thorough and also find exciting species. While there is no written rule addressing the question, "poaching" birds in another team's area is an absolute no-no.

Beginning this CBC season, the count period will always be 14 December through 5 January (instead of varying dates). This will ensure consistency and




Annual CBC results are published by National Audubon Society.

often include an extra weekend.

At day's end, at a compilation dinner, birders can tell stories about their adventures, and lists are tallied. Results are summarized by National Audubon in a special publication. This hefty annual volume is available for \$10 from: Christmas Bird Census Subscriptions, National Audubon

Society, Box 689, Lahaska, PA 18931.

MEANWHILE, back in the pre-dawn fir forest: *Who, who-who, hooooo*. A male Spotted Owl blows from the blackness just above our heads. His mate answers from up the canyon. "Spotted Owl, two." We scurry back to the bike trail that will lead us to the truck and ever onward to the next bird.

Call your local Audubon chapter and ask how you can volunteer to help on a Christmas Bird Count. Rain or shine, it's a great day in the field-of-wonder with like-minded friends. It's also a fine contribution to our knowledge of birds that can influence conservation management decisions. 

Rich Stallcup is PRBO's Naturalist in our Education Program.

My Season with Penguins—An Antarctic Journal, by PRBO Research Associate **Sophie Webb**, is now available in bookstores. Intended for people 10 years of age and older, this informative book is illustrated with delightful watercolor paintings. (Houghton-Mifflin, \$15)