

December 2008: Meditations on the Christmas Bird Count

There's a special day every December that many of us look forward to, a day full of gifts and surprises and merriment... and many hours spent tromping around in the snow and cold counting every bird one sees. Obviously, I'm not thinking of Christmas, but of Audubon's Christmas Bird Count. I have participated in the Thomaston-Rockland Count for almost 15 years now, and my husband and I have come to anticipate that Saturday before Christmas almost as much as we do the big holiday itself.

I can well imagine that to those who don't watch birds, or to those who prefer to admire the flocks at their bird feeders from the warmth of their homes, an entire winter day spent canvassing a particular area by car and on foot merely to tally all the birds seen there doesn't sound like a lot of fun. And I willingly admit that by day's end, when we're bone cold, hungry, and slip-sliding down some ice-covered road in dying light as a pit bull barks death threats at us from behind a fence we hope is high enough--with the vain hope of turning up one last kinglet or junco--it's not all fun and games for me, either.

But those are what we call bonding experiences, what makes us birding masochists come back for more, year after year. Like the year we walked around all day in freezing rain and snow, looking and feeling like human Popsicles by the end. Or like last year's memorable Count, when we got our car stuck in a snow bank at a cemetery, of all places, and had to call a tow truck. After we got the car out, it wouldn't start. So then we had to call my mother, who rescued us and generously offered to drive us around the rest of our route so we could finish our count. (Mom spotted the only hermit thrush of the day, too, without even getting out of her car, so it all worked out well in the end).

It's not all about shared misery, however. Mostly, it's really great fun to devote a whole day to seeing what we can see and then sharing sightings with our fellow birders who have been counting in the other territories within the Thomaston-Rockland Area's designated 15-mile radius circle. It's a day we often spend with friends, as the same people foolishly agree to join us each winter, sometimes wearing Santa hats. It's a day when all we do is look for birds (except for a brief and richly enjoyed lunch stop at the Brown Bag)--a whole day to indulge in my favorite pastime.

And it's a day, as I wrote earlier, of gifts. We never know what we're going to see, and that's the real thrill, the thrill of discovery. We've been counting in the

same section for ten years now, and you'd think we would know what to expect by now. We always count lots of sea ducks from the breakwater. We also walk its length to count the purple sandpipers that reliably hang out there every winter, the only place to find them in our section. The Samoset golf course harbors several hundred Canada geese. We spend a long time counting and identifying gulls in Clam Cove--we've had five species there more than once. If not iced in, Chickawaukie Lake usually offers up some coots and a lot of mallards. Chickadees, cardinals, titmice, goldfinches, mourning doves, starlings and crows are standard fare. At some point in the day, a bald eagle will soar overhead or a flock of turkeys will strut across the road--though twenty years ago, sighting either of those species would have been cause for jubilation, so we try not to take them for granted.



Purple Sandpipers on the Rockland Breakwater. Photo Credit: Brian Willson (who was probably wearing a Santa hat when he took this shot)

But there are always surprises to savor, too: the snow goose mixed in with all those Canada geese at the Samoset golf course. A Lapland longspur in a sand trap, horned larks on a golf green, and two pipits on the beach--that was an exciting count. Or the time when our friend Ron Joseph, owl caller extraordinaire, summoned in a barred owl at dusk. We've startled a red-tailed hawk dismembering a coot in the little park at Chickawaukie. Last year we were delighted to come across several flocks of Bohemian waxwings, erratic visitors

from up north that we'd never seen in our section before. Our best discoveries are sometimes the last ones of the day, like my mother's hermit thrush, or two semi-palmated plovers my husband and I were amazed to find on the breakwater beach during one last pass. Those plovers turned out to be the only ones recorded in Maine for that year's count.

When we gather at day's end with the other counters to compile the tallies, we learn of other surprises: crossbills, an orange-crowned warbler, last year's astounding sighting of a black vulture--a Southern species rarely seen in Maine at any time of year that ended up spending most of the winter at a poultry farm in Warren. You can tell by the smug looks around the table who has something significant to report, who found spotted something cool. So there's a bit of a competitive aspect to the Count, too. And since we're counting the same area every year, we have a certain species goal--if we don't break 40 in our section, we didn't have a "good" day. Which is why we find ourselves braving ice and pit bulls at near dark to find that one kinglet we know is out there.

This competitive spirit is what helped create the Christmas Count back in 1900. Disgusted by the Christmas "side hunts" in which hunters competed to see who could shoot the most birds in a day, ornithologist Frank Chapman established a non-lethal bird hunt in which participants competed to see who could simply see the most birds. Now the longest-running volunteer citizen science program in the world, according to Audubon, the more than 100 years of data collected by hardy birders during Counts across the Americas has helped scientists recognize trends in species' populations that enable them to analyze the health of our birds. Audubon's bird WatchList, released in 2007, was based in part on statistics compiled from Christmas Counts. Via Audubon's website, you can access Count data and determine for yourself species trends in your area, such as an increase in turkeys and titmice, for example, or a decrease in evening grosbeaks.

This year's count dates range from December 14 through January 5. For a list of Maine's 22 Count areas and their respective dates, and to learn how to partake in this joyful misery yourself, visit:

www.maineaudubon.org/explore/event/count.shtml. If you like birds, think of it as a Christmas present to both yourself and science.

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