

FORTY YEARS OF CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNTS IN CAPE MAY COUNTY (1927-1966)

by
ERNEST A. CHOATE
and
J. D'ARCY NORTHWOOD

In the December, 1900, issue of *Bird-Lore* Dr. Frank Chapman, the editor, asked for lists of birds seen on Christmas Day. He hoped for something to replace the detestable "side hunts" when parties of gunners hid themselves to the fields and woods on Christmas Day with the cheerful mission of killing practically everything that crossed their paths. The side hunts are now a thing of the past, but the Christmas Bird Counts have increased year by year until in 1966 there were 816 counts published in *Audubon Field Notes*, from every state as well as Canada.

The first Christmas Bird Census, as it was then known, appeared in the January-February, 1901, *Bird-Lore*. There were two counts from Canada and 23 from the United States. Charles H. Rogers submitted one for Central Park, New York City, and started the string which has made him the only participant on all the counts from the beginning to the present. Also in 1900 Witmer Stone sent a count from Tinicum Township, Pennsylvania.

The first report from Cape May County, New Jersey, was for Christmas, 1903. This count was conducted by William L. Baily, one of the founders and first president of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club. Covering the Wildwood area he found 37 species, including a Mockingbird. The next report for Cape May was Christmas, 1920, by Julian K. Potter and two others. These observers found 38 species. In 1923 Potter led another group and listed 48 species. He continued this annually through 1926.

It was not until 1927 that the present area, a circle with a radius of $7\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Rio Grande, was covered each year. Potter was the first leader. In later years the area was divided into ten sections, each of which could be covered adequately by one team of observers. Usually the same team covered the same section each year and thus became familiar with the best birding spots.

On Christmas Day, 1930, Witmer Stone and Otway Brown, the botanist, took a count at Cape May and listed 35 species in $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours. On December 28th they went out again with Potter's group, Stone being credited with 20 Lesser Scaup, one Woodcock, and 35 Titlarks. There were 78 species found by 17 observers in six groups. House Sparrows were ignored on Stone's count, but Potter listed them as "also English Sparrows." In 1931 Snow Geese were first listed, with the remark by J. Cadbury and H. Jopson that "these geese were not Gannets." The name of J. Fletcher Street appeared on the list of participants for the first time in 1931.

A map and instruction sheet were issued to all participants in the count of 1944. It was designed and introduced by Dale R. Coman and was printed by James Wright.

The recording of the counts and compilation of data for the reports were done by Potter until 1936 when Street took over. In 1943 Coman took over, Street saying that he had "run the damn thing long enough." Ernest A. Choate started in 1952.

In 1944 Potter and the Marshalls came in reporting two American Egrets and two Black Skimmers (first records for the count) and a live Dovekie. Harry Brown added another new bird, the Osprey.

In 1945 it was ten degrees at the start and twelve degrees on return, with a strong northwest wind and five inches of snow. A Razor-billed Auk, a King Eider, a Dovekie, and three very tame Virginia Rails were the highlights. A Red-headed Duck was reported for the first time.

There were three new birds in 1946, a Ring-necked Duck, a Caspian Tern, and a Dickcissel. The weather was very warm, 46-56 degrees, a record. Also a record was the total count of 117.

The comments below pertain to the forty-year period commencing in 1927. A complete tabulation of these forty counts is included elsewhere in this issue. In some cases a numbers increase in later years may be due to more observers and consequently better coverage of the area.

LOONS AND GREBES. The Common Loon, Red-throated Loon, and Horned Grebe were seen on all forty counts.

GANNETS AND CORMORANTS: Gannets were seen on 50% of the counts, the Double-crested Cormorant on 75%, and the Great Cormorant on 5%.

HERONS. The Great Blue Heron was seen on all counts. The other herons and egrets showed an increase in the second half of the counts, a reflection of the growing tendency of many herons to over-winter. The Cattle Egret, first reported in the area in May, 1952, was recorded on the Christmas Count only in 1959.

SWANS AND GEESE: The Whistling Swan was recorded on 13% of the counts. On a number of occasions in the later years a single bird spent the winter on Lily Lake. Brant showed a great increase in the latter half of the period, with an estimated 50,000 being recorded in 1957. This correlates with the recovery around 1946 of the eelgrass (*Zostera*), their chief food. It almost disappeared in 1931 due to a disease.

DUCKS: Ducks generally showed an increase in the latter half of the period. The Black Duck was the most numerous and was seen on all forty counts. A high of 8,000 was recorded in 1958. The Black is the common breeding duck of the area.

All three species of scoters were seen almost every year, although numbers varied greatly. The highest species count was over 10,000 Surf Scoters in 1933, but this species was missed completely in two years.

HAWKS: All hawks showed a decrease in the later years, some disastrously. The Cooper's was not seen at all during the last four counts, and the Bald Eagle almost disappeared from a high of 12 in 1952. Hawks, being at the end of a food chain, are particularly vulnerable to the chlorinated hydrocarbons.

Peregrines, never numerous, were not seen on the last six counts. They have disappeared as a breeding bird along the eastern seaboard. The Sparrow Hawk seemed to be holding up.

PHEASANTS AND GROUSE: The area is not attractive to Pheasants or Ruffed Grouse, but several were seen on a number of occasions. The Bobwhite held steady.

GALLINULES AND COOTS: The Common Gallinule was recorded only once, but Coots wintered in increasing numbers in the later years.

SHOREBIRDS: Killdeer were seen on every count, with generally higher numbers in the later years. Woodcock, which spend the winter in some numbers in the woods at the Point, were seen on 85% of the counts. A well-authenticated European Woodcock was seen in 1955. Purple Sandpipers have increased in numbers and were recorded on 90% of the counts. They are usually seen on rocky shores and were first noted in 1927 on the long rockpile at the entrance to the harbor. Dunlin were recorded on 93% of the counts, the highest total being 10,000 in 1966. The Sanderling is another hardy bird. This species was seen on all the counts, but not in such numbers as the Dunlin. The high count was 2,500.

GULLS AND TERNS: Gulls have increased in numbers, attracted no doubt by the greater opportunities for scavengering at garbage dumps and near fishing boats and canneries. Great Black-backed, Herring, Ring-billed, and Bonaparte's Gulls were recorded on every count. The two former species now nest in the state. Terns are, of course, scarce in winter, but the Forster's was seen on 20% of the counts.

DOVES AND PIGEONS: The Mourning Dove was recorded on 93% of the counts and showed an increase in the later years. The high was 325 in 1965.

The Rock Dove has been ignored. It is a completely feral bird and well established. Stone writes in *Bird Studies at Old Cape May*, "it would seem to merit mention as much as the English Pheasant, the Starling and the English Sparrow." It officially appeared only once on the counts, in 1938.

OWLS: Eight species have been recorded. The Short-eared, the most frequently observed, was noted on 73% of the counts and had a high in 1953 of 22.

SWIFTS: An almost incredible record of a Chimney Swift was accepted in 1928. It was seen by W. H. Cummings who noted, "one plainly seen and characteristic flight noted."

WOODPECKERS: Six species were seen, with Flickers, Downies, and Hairies on every count.

FLYCATCHERS: A Western Kingbird was seen once. The Eastern Phoebe was observed on 38% of the counts.

HORNED LARKS: This species was seen on every count, with a high of 1092 in 1947.

SWALLOWS: Tree Swallows regularly winter in the area, feeding on bayberries. A high of 1150 was seen in 1966. The Barn Swallow was recorded twice.

CROWS AND JAYS: The Common Crow, Fish Crow, and Blue Jay were recorded every year.

CHICKADEES: The Carolina is the resident at Cape May and was seen on every count. The Black-capped Chickadee was seen on six counts.

TITMICE AND NUTHATCHES: The resident Tufted Titmouse was seen on all counts. The White-breasted Nuthatch, a resident, was seen on 78% of the counts and the Red-breasted Nuthatch, a winter visitant, on 73% of the counts.

WRENS: The House Wren is a rarity in winter, with a total of 11 being seen on five counts. The Carolina Wren is resident and was seen on every count except one.

MOCKINGBIRDS: In the first ten years (1927-36) only eight Mockingbirds were seen. From 1942 on they were recorded every year, with a high in 1965 and 1966 of 160.

CATBIRDS AND THRASHERS: The Catbird and Brown Thrasher were seen almost every year. The highest counts were 29 and 15 respectively.

THRUSHES: Although the Robin is chiefly a migrant, the numbers found on the counts in later years increased. There were 4,000 recorded in 1966. The Wood Thrush was recorded in 1933 and 1946, a single bird each time. The Hermit Thrush was found on every count. The Eastern Bluebird crashed from 113 in 1959 to 11 the next year, then to four in 1961, and was missed completely in two of the last five years.

STARLINGS AND HOUSE SPARROWS: The Starling is now probably the most numerous bird in the area, although great numbers of them migrate. From a low of 250 in 1927 the counts were in the ten and twenty thousands during the later years. House Sparrows were never as plentiful, 2900 in 1965 being the maximum. It is odd that they were not included in the counts until 1932 inasmuch as the Starlings, also an introduced species, were included in the counts when first seen. Starlings were established in New York City in 1890 and were first recorded at Cape May in 1909, according to Stone.

WARBLERS: There are few species present in winter. There are three records of the Orange-crowned, in 1952 and 1959 when single birds were seen and in 1954 when no less than 11 were observed! Palm Warblers were seen on 63% of the counts. The Myrtle Warbler, of course, is one of the most numerous small birds of the area in winter, feeding mainly on the bayberries and the fruits of the poison ivy. A high count of 17,257 was made in 1935.

BLACKBIRDS: Meadowlarks were seen on every count, with a high of 1,100 in 1957. Redwings were plentiful, with a high of 50,000 in 1960. There was one record for a Baltimore Oriole and one for a Bullock's Oriole. Rusty Blackbirds were seen on 80% of the counts, with a high of 206 in 1945.

In the later years a small colony of Boat-tailed Grackles became established near the clam cannery on the north side of Cape May harbor. A high of 65 was recorded in 1965.

The Common Grackle was seen every year except 1936. The high count was 50,000 in 1960.

FINCHES: The Cardinal seemed to be increasing in later years. The species was seen on every count, with a high of 350 in 1958.

Evening Grosbeaks were erratic. They were recorded on nine counts, with the high being 345 in 1963.

Purple Finches were seen on 78% of the counts, with a high of 53 in 1958. The House Finch is a newcomer. Four were first seen in 1965, and there were 66 the next year. Also increasing in numbers was the Goldfinch, with a high of 900 in 1962. Red Crossbills were seen in 1963, and there were five White-winged Crossbills in 1954.

Sharp-tailed Sparrows and Seaside Sparrows were seen almost every year. The high counts were 55 and 17 respectively.

Other sparrows, the White-throated, Fox, Swamp, and Song, seemed to be holding their own or even increasing.

Lapland Longspurs were observed on 28% of the counts and Snow Buntings on 65%.

(Editor's note — The cumulative species total for the forty counts between 1927 and 1966 was 216. The highest single count was 153 in 1959. The Cape May Count was usually among the first ten in the country.

With Ernest Choate's take-over as compiler of the count in 1952 a new era of reporting was ushered in. This was highlighted by the letter of transmittal. Dr. Choate, who has never been known for his lack of a sense of humor, detailed the events of the counts in an unorthodox but very effective manner. The following letters were mailed to Miss Elizabeth Manning of the National Audubon Society together with the tabulations of the 1961 and 1965 counts.

These letters are reprinted here with the permission of Dr. Choate and Miss Manning.)

January 8th 1962

Miss Elizabeth Manning
National Audubon Society
1130 Fifth Avenue
New York 28, N.Y.
My dear Elizabeth,

This is to substantiate, with all the modesty and yet self-confidence of which the DVOC is capable, another brilliant performance. What might be considered as wistful aberrations if turned in by other groups must be accepted with respectful acclaim when submitted by so august a body as our own.

Of the 57 common loons observed, 50 were seen by the party skirting the Cape by boat. Visibility was tops, the ocean was calm. There was no sea swell. The loons, apparently impressed by our interest, cooperated in a most extraordinary manner. As we approached an area, they unanimously surfaced and refrained from diving until we rechecked the count. This happened repeatedly, and so it is obviously apparent, at least to the DVOC, that the loons acted in this way with deliberate intent. Our admiration for the intelligence of this so-called primitive bird is only exceeded by our appreciation of its cooperative spirit. We suggest that it be moved from its present initial and lowly position on the checklist to the highest and after the sparrows. Our previous high count for the common loon was 52 in 1931.

Two Green Herons were seen. Two different parties saw single birds in the salt marsh. One group was headed by Joseph M. Cadbury. I'm sure you have heard of him. He's fairly reliable. Julian K. Potter and his group reported the second heron. His reports have not been questioned, let alone contradicted, for the last fifty years, and so why should we start now? If you want to question the green heron will you please write to the individuals mentioned yourself as I'm afraid I'm not up to it. The last person who did so was not recognized at a meeting for five years. The only previous time a green heron was reported was in 1956.

For the last three successive years a single Broad-winged Hawk has been recorded. Alan Brady and Bob Grant did it this time. Their reactions to the two previous reports were not loud or even politely inquisitive. They said nothing, but the twitch of their lips, the twist of their noses, and the quivering undulations of their right eyebrows (we always use the right eyebrow in the DVOC — we're a very conservative group) cast a slight shadow over the conviviality of our meeting last year. The Broad-wing report this year was received not only respectfully but with nodding acclamation. It is not our custom to applaud or shout "Bravo." We expect you to accept this report in the same spirit. No special acknowledgment is expected, of course. Just don't question it.

As the boat party was easing out of the stone jetties to the ocean carefully screening the cold wet rocks for Purple Sandpipers, Bob Leeds, known among the natives hereabouts as Eagle Eye, shouted in a voice that was heard, not only above the roar of the motors but also reverberating and re-echoing from the rocks, "Black Skimmer! Black Skimmer! Black Skimmer!" As a matter of fact, when we rejoined some others on land in the afternoon, we were greeted with "We heard you saw a Black Skimmer." We turned the boat

in the churning current for a better view and took out our cameras for an indisputable corroborative record. Upon seeing this, the bird flew toward the boat and passed back and forth on the side away from the sun. When it saw our photographic gambit had been completed, it returned to its place on a rock and bowed respectfully. As we passed out of the channel and until we were almost out of sight, it continued to wave its right wing to us. You may have a copy of these pictures on request. Of course we expect the request to be accompanied by the return of, at least, the compiler's entry fee. Because of skyrocketing costs we find it necessary to try to make some slight charge. After all, what do you think the boat runs on, water? I mean what do you think we put in the gas tank? Well, we don't expect to be questioned on the Black Skimmer. This is the third time it has been recorded on the census. The last date was 1946.

Black-capped Chickadees are rare in our area. We have only seen them on three previous counts. As a tremendous influx of these birds has been noted in the southern Delaware Valley this fall, we were not too surprised at the record of 34 for this year. Our best previous count was 8 in 1954. The bird was seen by four different parties. The highest number (25) was seen by Joseph Jacobs and his group.

For the third time in the last four years we have seen the Boat-tailed Grackle. This year we found 19 individuals. It fell upon Alan Brady and Bob Grant again to substantiate what they had not accepted previously with the quiet and gentlemanly acquiescence with which reports are usually received by our august members. But after the rather sorry obsequiousness with which they mentioned the Broad-wing, as previously noted, this further demonstration of mature and adult responsibility really endeared them to all of us. Questioning on your part of their observations would, I am afraid, have a traumatic effect on both their psyches. Personally, I wouldn't care if only one psyche blew up but we wouldn't like to have two go off. Or would we? Use your own judgement.

If you have any questions on points I haven't covered, please write to David Cutler. He didn't go on the trip but he knows the answers.

Sincerely,
/s/ Ernie Choate

The following letter, transmitting the 1965 results, contained a few caustic comments also on the poor showing of 1964.

January 5th 1966

My dear Elizabeth,

First of all the members of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club want to thank you for the words of understanding and sympathy for their valiant efforts on the tundra at Cape May last year which you so graciously included in *Audubon Field Notes*. It gave us the courage to go on. Weather is not our only handicap. A few others that plague us follow. There is no significance in their order. Narrow provincial loyalty, low morality, decline in virility, housing shortage, population explosion, failing eyesight, pollution, insecticides, drought, loss of hearing, liquor, war in Viet Nam, Peace Corps, war on poverty, and television. We would be glad to have your sympathy on any of the problems. In fact, you are somewhat responsible. Take low morality. Who encourages defection to the warmer climate of Florida? Who shows it is possible to get over 200 birds on a day's list? Who supplies ornithological

gigolos to lead the pack? Who encourages the spirit of status on Christmas counts? Who interposes in the Florida reports "carefully studied", "all field marks", "seen through bifocals". You may right this wrong as you see fit. I'll take care of the liquor problem.

We added one bird to our cumulative list, the House Finch. It was seen by David Cutler, Herbert Cutler, and Edward Reimann. All are familiar with the bird. We rather expected the bird to turn up as it was seen more than once in the fall. It has extended its range into this area and is increasingly common to the north.

Our cumulative list now stands at 216.

The Great Cormorant was seen for the second time on the Cape May Count. This one was sitting with three Double-cresteds on a rock jetty. We approached the birds to within twenty feet by boat. The Great Cormorant was an immature bird with distinctive markings and noted by three observers.

The Black-headed Gull was seen for the third time. It passed 15 feet over the heads of the group of Wayne Marshall, a Christmas Count veteran. The gull has been seen frequently this fall in the area.

A Saw-whet Owl was seen for the second time. One of the boys plucked it from a low limb and brought it along to the data processing station. It was then banded and released.

Some of the misses and low numbers are interesting. This is the first time no bluebirds were seen if we omit the 1920 count that had only three participants. The number of Titmice was the lowest since 1936, and the Myrtle Warblers since 1923. We have seen no Cooper's Hawk for three years although continuously observed from 1927 to 1962. The single Turkey Vulture and Red-shoulder may be partially accounted for by the northeast storm.

Sincerely,
/s/ Ernie Choate