

Citizen Science is Alive and Well! by Phil Krajewski

What does each of the following incredible observations have in common?

- Varied Thrush – 12/13/04 Chambersburg area
- Gray Kingbird – 12/13/04 West Chester area
- MacGillivray's Warbler - 12/13/04 Lehigh Valley area (first state sighting ever)
- Rufous Hummingbird – 12/19/03 Williamsport
- Black-headed Grosbeak – 12/18/02 Southern Lancaster County
- Pacific-slope or Cordilleran Flycatcher - 12/17/01 Southern Lancaster County

If the December dates are any indication, all of these sightings took place as part of the National Audubon Society's 102nd – 105th Pennsylvania Christmas Bird Counts.

WOW! I am very excited when I hear of such unusual sightings and realize that bird species that have never, or rarely, been seen in Pennsylvania can suddenly appear to a birdwatcher. This 'arrowhead in the field' discovery quality that watching birds provides has been one of the avian perks that has always helped raise the binoculars to my eyes when presented with yet another flock of European Starlings prancing about like formal butlers in a springtime pasture. Who knows when a Brewer's Blackbird or two just might decide to show up?

The Christmas Bird Count (CBC), which started in 1900, represents the longest running database in ornithology, and, with 2030 count circles and over 57,000 participants, it may be the largest and most comprehensive citizen science project in the world. Primarily a Western Hemisphere initiative, the CBC is an active event from Guam to Bermuda, and from Drake Passage, Chile, to Prudhoe Bay, Alaska.

There were originally 25 count areas from Toronto, Canada, to Pacific Grove, California, with only 27 bird watchers seeing a total of 90 species. Pennsylvania, with five participating areas in 1900, had more than any other state. In 1953 the Mansfield CBC, with its geographical center in Whitneyville, joined in this national effort to monitor the status and distribution of bird populations in North America.

The CBC was created by ornithologist Frank Chapman in response to the Christmas "Side Hunt", in which people would go afield with gun in hand and kill as many birds as possible. The "Side" with the most feathered and furred kills was declared the winner. Chapman, who had nothing against real hunting or hunters, felt that this wanton slaughter for fun contained no benefit, as well as seriously contributing to the demise of bird populations. He proposed a new holiday tradition, the CBC, in which people counted live birds in friendly competition, and therefore utilized their time and energy in a more appropriate manner.

This year, the count will run from December 14 to January 5, with the Mansfield CBC taking place on Saturday, December 16. This avian time interval is referred to as "early winter" and is an optimal period for birdwatching because some birds are still in the late stages of migration, while more northerly migrants may already be here, increasing the possibility of more sightings.

Each CBC district is a designated geographical area, which is always a circle with a 15 mile diameter. Central Park in New York City, one of the original 1900 locations, is a very unusual district, with the park rectangle providing a great deal of the action for the New Jersey-Lower Hudson CBC. Incorporating the tops of street lights, areas beneath hotel

awnings, and penthouse bird feeders, with the Hudson and East River waterways, produces one of the more intriguing lists each year. The total lifetime Central Park CBC species list is so astounding as to suggest that birds also prefer experiencing this artistic and cultural NYC rite of passage as much as humans do.

Regardless of the circles' makeup, consistently doing the same area year after year insures for dependable data and reveals trends clearly. The Mansfield CBC includes Wellsboro to the west and Mansfield to the east, takes in the southern portion of Tioga/Hammond Lakes, and ends just north of Arnot.

Approximately 15 people participate each year in the Mansfield CBC. The weather conditions can vary considerably. If it is warm and the waterways are open, the existence of water birds may increase the number of species recorded. However, if it is extremely cold with large amounts of snow cover in the northeast, certain cold weather species may be present. These could include Pine Siskins, Snow Buntings, Redpolls, Evening Grosbeaks, and a rare visit from a Snowy Owl. With the possibility of southern stragglers or northern visitors augmenting the number of dependable yearly residents, such as the Black-capped Chickadee, American Goldfinch, and Downy Woodpecker, the local CBC list tends to be around fifty species counted.

While my list of birds varies from year to year, I have counted in past CBC's a Winter Wren, Golden-crowned Kinglets, Eastern Bluebirds, a Brant (confined to Lake Nessmuk with a broken wing), American Kestrels, Snow Buntings, Horned Larks, Northern Mockingbirds, and an American Robin. Although some of these species are common in Tioga County, to see an American Robin hopping along the side of a road in mid-December with conditions well below freezing with twenty mile per hour winds and snow on the ground, is indeed something special.

Please participate this year in the 107th CBC; citizen science at its most basic level. Whether you plan to watch birds from your feeder or observe them in the field, or, if you are just a beginner or an expert birder, **we need volunteers!** Call me at 570-324-2492 and I will make sure that you have an assignment on December 16th that you feel comfortable with.

See you on Saturday!

Birdwatch appears the second Wednesday of each month in the Outdoor Section of the Wellsboro Gazette. Please visit our website at www.tiaudubon.org for information on birding or the Tiadaghton Audubon Society.