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A Lifetime of CBC Adventures

It began for me in 1934, when I was 16. It was the day after Christmas, and my neighbor Clinton Reynolds and I thought it would be interesting (and fun) to conduct an Audubon Christmas Bird Census (CBC) in our home town of Belmont, Massachusetts. One count had been taken in this same area by Ralph Hoffman, the author of our favorite field guide, in 1900, the very first year of Frank Chapman's CBC program. My dad had taken 13 CBCs in Massachusetts from 1906 to 1910, generally in the company of a relative or friend, but none had been published from Belmont since 1916.

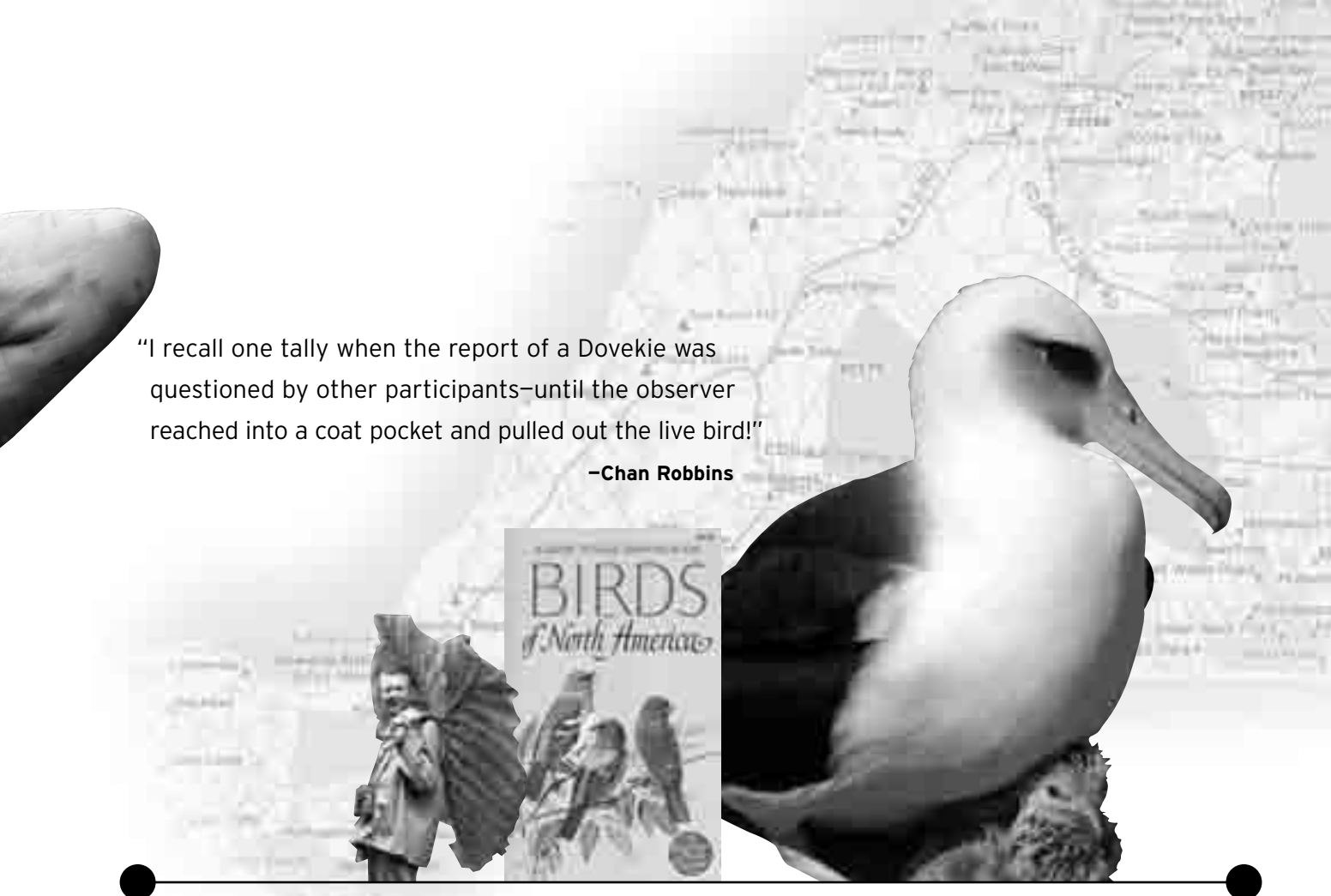
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Chandler S. Robbins recently retired after 60 years of service with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at the Patuxent Research Center in Maryland. In addition to his research into the effects of DDT on birds, he co-authored Birds of Maryland and the District of Columbia, worked on Midway Atoll on the Navy's birds-versus-aircraft problems, and started Operation Recovery, a cooperative bird-banding program along the Atlantic Coast. As part of the North American Breeding Bird Survey, which he co-initiated in 1966, he has been monitoring continental breeding bird populations for 40 years. In the 1980s, and again in the past five years, Robbins has been heavily involved in breeding bird atlas studies, especially those in Maryland.



"I recall one tally when the report of a Dovekie was questioned by other participants—until the observer reached into a coat pocket and pulled out the live bird!"

—Chan Robbins

Facing page: Frank M. Chapman (far lower left) and Chandler S. Robbins (far left) are two of the key figures in the history of the CBC—Chapman founded it in 1900, and Robbins has been involved on many levels since 1934. Interestingly, Chapman retired as editor of *Bird-Lore*, where the CBC was published, in 1934. Fieldwork for both took them to Latin America, where Chan was not shy to show off bug bites, and both have been instrumental in the growth of popularity of “birdwatching.” Montage photos/David Holmes & USGS Patuxent

In spite of the rain that day, we found 25 species, with the most common being Herring Gull, Black-capped Chickadee, and Common Merganser. In those days (prior to 1937) counters did not report party hours and party miles, but because we worked separately, our six and a half hours afoot would have translated into 13 party hours. Our prize birds of the day were two male Barrow's Goldeneyes on Fresh Pond. This is a rare bird in New England, especially in fresh water, but they were unmistakable with their crescent faces, purple heads, and dark sides. Later, after the count was published, none other than Ludlow Griscom phoned me to inquire about the details

of the observation. His home was only two miles from Fresh Pond, and he had never found Barrow's there. I described the birds and added that they were the first I had ever seen, which he said was just what he wanted to know. He could not accept a record from a couple of teenagers who had never seen the species before. In subsequent years, however, the goldeneyes were seen there by many other observers.

From 1934 onward I continued to compile the Belmont and Fresh Pond (Cambridge), Massachusetts, CBC annually through 1947, and after I moved to Maryland my parents continued to do so through 1967. In 1972 our small Belmont territory was merged

into the Greater Boston 15-mile diameter circle, which is still very active today. The 1935 count was not published; I know not why. That was our record year for Blue Jays (74) and Cedar Waxwings (56).

The Search for Frank Chapman

I had always wanted to meet Dr. Frank M. Chapman, who had the foresight to initiate the Christmas Bird Count and require that hours afield must accompany each bird count. He was one of my birding idols, for I had grown up with his *Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America* and had read every book in the Belmont Public Library that bore his name. My chance came one summer when I was a nature

counselor at a Salvation Army camp for inner-city children in northern New Jersey. When I had a couple of days off between sessions, I hitchhiked to New York City, slept on a bench in Central Park, and went looking for Dr. Chapman at his office in the American Museum of Natural History the next morning. To ensure that I would be admitted to the private offices of the museum I had brought along a fresh specimen of a blue-tailed skink that I had found along the highway. The only problem was that Dr. Chapman was not in his office that day, so I never did get to meet him. As a consolation for my efforts, I received an acknowledgment from the museum thanking me for donating "One Skunk"!

College Years

During my college years at Harvard, I participated in the Newburyport, Cape Ann, and Cape Cod counts whenever someone offered me a ride, and once I was fortunate to have a chance to participate in the Martha's Vineyard count, though this was just after the death of the last Heath Hen. Ludlow Griscom used to say that the 15-mile diameter of the Vineyard circle was measured in nautical miles, but I never bothered to check that out because so much of the circle's area at sea was not covered by observers.

Mount Washington

My family owned a summer cottage in New Hampshire where we spent part of each summer. I wondered what birds might be found in winter in the harsh climate of New Hampshire's Mount Washington, which I had climbed in summer but had not visited in winter. A check of back issues of *Bird-Lore* showed that there had never been a CBC there, so I organized a crew of eight observers to cover several trails on the mountain on December 21, 1942. When we checked the radio report from the summit at dawn, we learned that the temperature was -49 degrees Fahrenheit, and the wind speed was 99 mph. We quickly

Tips from Chan

Just for the record, my usual CBC procedure is to bird alone throughout the day unless I find a young trainee to accompany me; occasionally a reporter will stay with me for an hour or less. After driving the less-traveled roads in search of owls, I typically spend the entire morning in a single long hike that returns me to my starting point, and I follow the same route year after year. In the afternoon I drive to other points in my assigned sector, looking for species I had missed on my morning hike and trying to increase my species totals. Then I try for more owls in the evening. I do not use recordings, but I do use imitations to attract screech-owls, Hermit Thrushes, and White-throated Sparrows, and squeaking or "pishing" for songbirds in general.



Photo/Barbara Powell/USGS Patuxent

changed plans and took our count in the nearby Carter Range, with temperatures of -26 degrees to 5 degrees, but with calm winds. Then on December 26, with temperatures above zero, we completed a CBC on Mount Washington, covering 30 party miles on snowshoes. We considered ourselves fortunate to find 383 birds of 19 species, the most common being 133 American Goldfinches, 85 Black-capped Chickadees, 41 Golden-crowned Kinglets, and 30

White-winged Crossbills. My one regret about the Carter Range count was that because of a typographic error the starting temperature for the day was published as "0-26°" instead of "-26°."

Origin of the Maryland CBCs

The next 60 years of my life were spent working for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Geological Survey at Maryland's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, and for the first time in my life I owned a car and could go when and where I pleased.

When Bob Stewart and I started work on a book on the birds of Maryland and the District of Columbia, we thought it would be helpful to establish CBCs (now Christmas Bird Counts instead of Censuses) in strategic parts of Maryland that were not being sampled, in order to learn more about comparative abundance of various species throughout the state. So with the help of members of the Maryland Ornithological Society, we established counts at Solomons and in southeastern Worcester County in 1946; southern Dorchester County and Susquehanna Flats in 1947; Kent Island, Ocean City, southern Anne Arundel County, and Wicomico in 1948; and Allegany County, Garrett County, Catoclin Mountain, and Crisfield in 1949. I have never had any ambition to originate, compile, or participate in a record number of CBCs, but I did find the results helpful in defining the winter distribution of birds within Maryland.

The Editorial Years

From 1947 to 1990, when I had the pleasure of being volunteer associate editor and technical editor of *Audubon Field Notes*, which became *American Birds*, I got to know many of the CBC compilers personally or through correspondence. Former CBC editor Peggy Hickey was living with her husband, Joe, at Patuxent at the time of the transition, so the change in editors went smoothly. I was especially impressed by some of the old-timers, such as Charlie Rogers of

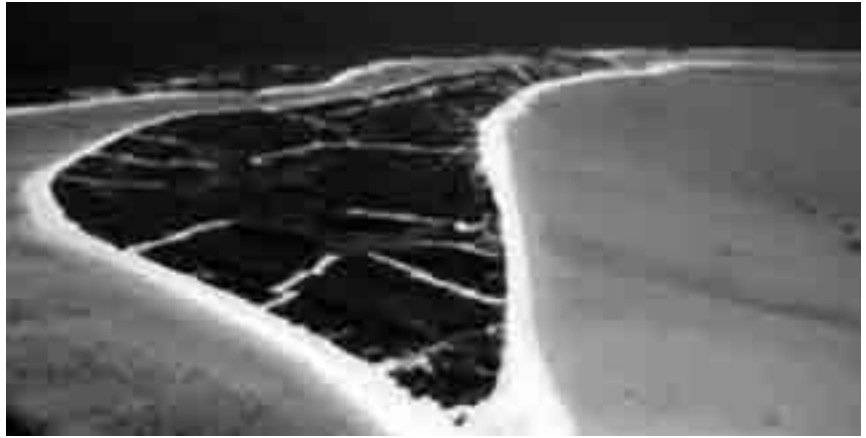
Princeton, who took his 78th CBC in 1976, and Harry B. McConnell, who completed his 55th Cadiz, Ohio, count in 1955 at age 89. McConnell had started in the second year of the CBC and had not missed a single year. Rogers had participated in the very first CBC in 1900 and had missed only one year before his death at age 89.

CBC Participation by Professional Ornithologists in the Nation's Capital

Prior to 1911, Christmas Bird Counts had been taken only sporadically in the National Capital Region, but in that year one of my predecessors, Wells W. Cooke of the U.S. Biological Survey, found 27 species between Kenilworth and Congress Heights. Three other persons submitted smaller lists. In 1912, Cooke extended his coverage to Dyke, Virginia, and found 32 species. The following year saw four counts in the District of Columbia area, including one by Alexander Wetmore of the Smithsonian Institution, one by Congressman Edmund Platt and Samuel Mellott, M.D., one by Biological Survey scientists E.A. Preble, S.E. Piper, and W.L. McAtee, and one by Audubon members Mr. and Mrs. Leo Miner and Raymond Moore. Over the next few years, through 1930, biologists Preble, McAtee, and Wetmore revised their route a bit each year, gradually increasing their annual species list to 48 species.

In 1932 U.S. Geological Survey biologists Baker, McKnight, Nolan, and Rubey began a count that became a tradition through 1978 at Accokeek, Maryland, across the Potomac from Mount Vernon, and in 1947 they started a companion count at Brooke on the Virginia side of the river, which is still being continued by other observers.

I was permitted to participate just once as a substitute in the CBC of Port Tobacco, Maryland, which was run in strict uniformity by a group of Biological Survey and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists from 1927 to 1946. According to their rules, a bird could not be counted unless it was



Kure Atoll, Northwest Hawaiian Island chain—a major nesting site for Laysan Albatross. Photo/USGS Patuxent

seen—not even an owl, a cardinal, or a titmouse. After 20 years the participants tried to analyze the results and publish a report, but they found, much to their disappointment, that too few trends were detected in a single locality to result in a publishable paper. What a contrast with today, with the entire CBC file available to anyone on the Internet!

A CBC on a Pacific Atoll

Of the 10 winters I spent working with albatrosses on Midway Atoll, only once (in 1960) was I there during the CBC season. My assistant that year was Ed Wilson of Annapolis, who was a retired Navy Commander. I worked Eastern Island while he covered Sand Island. We tallied nearly 48,000 birds of 18 species. I asked Ed at the end of the day how he was able to count so many more albatrosses than I did. He explained that he had climbed the water tower to get a bird's-eye view of Sand Island. Never in my years there had I been so bold as to attempt to climb that tower, but because Ed outranked practically everyone on the island he didn't hesitate to do so.

Personal Notes

At 88 I am still young enough to hope to find a surprise such as a seasonal rarity whenever I spend a winter day in the field. Some of my memorable CBC surprises have been Pine Grosbeaks in Garrett County and Catocin Mountain, MD; an Eastern

Phoebe and a Chipping Sparrow in Allegany County, MD; Harris's Sparrow at Seneca, MD; Western Kingbird and Wilson's Warbler at Southeastern Worcester County, MD; Indigo Bunting at Chincoteague, VA; Black-legged Kittiwake at Sabine Refuge in Louisiana; Yellow-breasted Chat at Ocean City, MD; and Ovenbird and Dickcissel at our own feeder. I had persuaded Seth Low to move the center of the Triadelphia Reservoir CBC circle 200 yards in its second year so as to include my backyard, and he never regretted it.

I'll never know exactly how many CBCs I have participated in. One count was rejected by the editor, at least one was never submitted by the compiler, and several counts had credited members and guests of the bird club without listing names. What I can claim are 351 counts from 32 localities, all of which were published by Audubon with names of observers. The most I did in any one year was 12 in 1977. Believe me, even for someone like me, that is too many.

The climax of every CBC comes at the tally, where you compare notes with your friends, learn what surprises were encountered by other observers, find out which species were missed by every party, and see how the day's totals compare with those of previous years. I recall one tally when the report of a Dovekie was questioned by other participants—until the observer reached into a coat pocket and pulled out the live bird! 🐦