

Haida Gwaii A CBC Challenge



Image courtesy of Davenport Maps Ltd.



Getting thoroughly sandblasted while “hurricane birding” during the Tlell CBC. Photo/Peter Hamel

“Service temporarily suspended until further notice due to an extended storm warning, which includes hurricane-force southeast winds over the next twenty-four to thirty-six hours,” reported the BC Ferries sailing update.

So much for our plan to do the Hecate Strait Christmas Bird Count from the deck of the *Queen of Prince Rupert*. This development was the continuation of what had been a very stormy season on Haida Gwaii (also known as the Queen Charlotte Islands), a remote archipelago off the northern coast of British Columbia. The weather was equally wild for the Tlell CBC, when we got thoroughly sandblasted. We watched Common Goldeneye dash like tiny winged torpedoes over the thundering seas to land in Southeast Harbour; Dunlin hunkered in the sand with eyes closed, waiting out the storm.

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Margo Hearne and Peter Hamel work from their home in Masset on the Queen Charlotte Islands. Irish-born Hearne settled in Masset in 1974 and began serious birding in 1983. As executive director of the Delkatla Sanctuary Society, Hearne raised \$350,000 to build a nature center in Masset. She self-published a book, Small Birds Cling to Bare Branches: Nesting Songbirds of Haida Gwaii. Peter Hamel has been birding since about 1950 and completed his first CBC in 1953. He broke the Canadian record in 1988 by seeing 436 species that year. Before moving to the Queen Charlotte Islands in 1994, Hamel worked on environmental issues in the national office of the Anglican Church. He now focuses on the birds of the islands through CBCs, Breeding Bird Surveys, and other surveys.

Mother Nature and other factors thwart our efforts

The challenges associated with the Christmas Bird Counts on Haida Gwaii can be titanic: blizzards, white-outs, and heavy seas on a balmy 12 degrees Fahrenheit day. After one count we had to send our binoculars away to have the sand removed; on another we barely got away from Rose Spit when our bikes were partially swept away by heavy seas—all the while Orcas cruised offshore. We have surfed home on a following sea from Langara Island with Killer Whales and Short-tailed Shearwaters and taken a boat to Naden Harbour the next day to find only a single Chestnut-backed Chickadee in the murky forest twilight of a constant drizzle. Twenty-four years; 99 counts. People have died, divorced, and remarried. Children have grown up and left home; dogs that came with us have died, replaced by new pups trained not to chase birds.

The results have been amazing. The CBC's consistency has proven what birds winter here and whether they are lost or resident. We are slowly learning about the forces at play when the winds swing around in an ever-changing sky, as well as the provenance of birds caught up in those storms. It's important; birds are bellwethers of the future. Haida Gwaii, though it has been protected on some fronts, is still vulnerable to threats of logging and offshore drilling. The greed for wind power in Hecate Strait will potentially obliterate offshore birds now wintering at Rose Spit and Sandspit. As the intense human aggression toward the natural world continues, what can we do? We can count birds—in winter, in the wild elemental fury of the storms.

How it Began

Peter started the Haida Gwaii CBCs when he came to Masset, on Graham Island, on sabbatical in 1982. His research had shown that two CBCs had

been done previously, one in 1947–48 by R.M. Stewart and one by Adrian Dorst in 1971–72. The exciting discoveries of those early counts inspired Peter to continue. When he started he knew that for the data to be useful the counts had to be continued for many years. It had to be birding over the long haul. From 1983 to 1993 he flew from his home in Toronto every year to participate, while Margo, who had lived in Masset since 1974 and worked for the Delkatla Sanctuary Society, organized the counts. It was a concentrated, exhausting, four-day blitz. Then, in January 1994, when Peter moved permanently to Masset, the counts were spread over the count period, which lessened some of the pressure.

Peter had grown up on CBCs organized by the renowned George North, of Hamilton, Ontario, so he was “George North trained.” Back then, before the Hamilton count would begin, George would scout the enormous bird count area and give out a list of the unusual species

present and expect Peter to find them.

It's not the same on the Queen Charlotte Islands. Rarities, if not coming to feeders, seldom stay for more than 24 hours. All the expectation and excitement is jammed into count day. The Cattle Egret and the Townsend's Solitaire were never seen again after their initial discovery during a CBC. There have been a few exceptions—a Prairie Warbler, seen and sketched by Margo one count day, was then seen again by both of us when it reappeared in Masset on 25 January for eight minutes!

Getting the Word Out

One way we generate interest in the Christmas counts is to write short articles for the local newspapers, emphasizing the highlights of the previous year's counts; we also advertise the dates and phone folks who've helped out in the past. In addition, we distribute a CBC-specific checklist. The number of participants islandwide is encouraging, and while some don't go out into the



Margo Hearne checks the temperature aboard the ferry on the 105th Hecate Strait CBC. Photo/Peter Hamel



Peter Hamel talks to a school group in the fog on the Port Clements count. Involvement of observers of all ages and sections of the community (rain or shine) is a key aspect of the success of Christmas Bird Counts on Haida Gwaii. Photo/Margo Hearne

Haida Gwaii continually surprises



Martin Williams and Peter Hamel enjoy a calm interlude during the Rose Spit Count. Photo/Margo Hearne



Aerial view of Rose Spit on a clear day, with mainland Canada in the distance. Photo/Peter Hamel



Storm clouds over the beach at Tlell. Photo/Margo Hearne

field, they feeder-watch, check their favorite local spots, and call us with their sightings prior to and after the counts. Although people in every community know that the counts are occurring, apart from a coterie of very committed people, some may not want their names mentioned or recorded, and we often hear, sometimes thrice removed, of a bird seen somewhere. It can be a guessing game to see who will or will not participate, but there have been an amazing number of people over the years who have made the count part of their Christmas season.

Land Birds

Because no long-term studies had been done here before the CBCs started, there was little knowledge of the species, numbers, and habitat requirements of land birds on the islands during the winter months. We now know that the deep *chuck* of the dark island “Sooty” Fox Sparrow is to be expected, the tiny Winter Wren is a year-round resident, the furtive little Lincoln’s Sparrow should have left but didn’t, the Red-breasted Nuthatch nests here but isn’t always heard, Savannah Sparrows are migrants, and Townsend’s and Orange-crowned warblers hang around for a while if the winter has been mild. We also know that European Starling num-

bers are increasing wildly. The first and only island records for the Rose-breasted Grosbeak and the Cassin’s Finch showed up at friends’ feeders. We learn all this and more each time a count is completed. Through the consistency of the counts we are beginning to understand what we stand to lose as our forests are turned into pulp.

Wetland Birds

Only 3 percent of the coast of British Columbia consists of coastal wetlands, and Haida Gwaii is blessed with several important wetlands, including Delkatla Wildlife Sanctuary, Yakoun Estuary, Kumdis Slough, and Honna Estuary. Our waterfowl numbers prove how critical the island wetland habitat is, and although on occasion we get fogged in, the results over the years have shown why the islands are so important to wintering waterfowl. Since the restoration of Delkatla Wildlife Sanctuary to a tidal area in 1995, waterfowl numbers have increased, and it’s one of the places that is checked more than once a day. Rare birds frequently occur there. An amazing record occurred in 1982 during our very first CBC, when the first and only Cattle Egret for Masset landed on a cow! When last seen, the egret was being chased out of Delkatla by two Common Ravens and was never seen again. One

year a Northern Goshawk swept in and took one of the Green-winged Teal we had counted earlier, and Peregrine Falcons are regular visitors as they stoop to the tasty teal feeding in the mud flats.

Sea Birds

The sea birds are the creatures that excite the senses and challenge the mind. At Rose Spit birds speed by in the offing, barely in the visible world, hidden by the surging swells and reappearing to swing around the spit as if on their way to a very urgent appointment. In the first year we counted thousands of Long-tailed Ducks; next year they were Common Murres, then Cassin’s Auklets. Ancient Murrelets often land, like so many jumping-jacks, sideways and scattershot in the choppy inshore seas. There are frequently mixed flocks, and an errant Sooty or Short-tailed shearwater may appear soaring away, black against the whitening sky. We observers, a mere rocky outcrop on the timeless sand, stand in awe of it all and get chilled to the bone, because, as Peter says, “we have to count them while we’re here.”

Sea State

Island life used to depend on the weather; if it was severe, dinner may not make it to the table. Although most of us now find survival in the aisles of the

local supermarket, the wild world doesn't have the same luxury. The seas that kept the *Queen of Prince Rupert* tied to the dock wreaked havoc on offshore birds. The unremitting hurricane-force winds that swept up Hecate Strait from



Lifeless Cassin's Auklet washed up on Tlell beach, February 2006.
Photo/Margo Hearne

October to February in the winter of 2005–06 dropped many a tiny, lifeless form on the beaches of Tlell: Cassin's Auklets, Fork-tailed Storm-Petrels, and Northern Fulmars. Those hardy little creatures could not withstand the relentless seas.

When the ferry eventually sailed in early January, those of us on the Hecate Strait CBC were fortunate to see a live fulmar perform its art of soaring, and Sooty and Short-tailed shearwaters glistened dark gold in a surprising sun. We were thrilled to see a Buller's Shearwater lift from the waves and take wing quickly to somewhere very far away. Sea state is not a state of mind, but a state of reality. Like "snow cover," "open water," and "wild food crop," history needs to know the state of the sea when the counts are done. If it's calm, birds are seen. If it's not, they're not.

Commentary


The Christmas Bird Counts are critical to our knowledge of continental bird populations, and the Haida Gwaii counts help fill the gaps and provide surprises, year after year. We have learned much about the bird species and numbers since we started in 1982. In some instances, this has helped to protect vital bird habitat. If the CBCs hadn't recorded the wintering flock of

Black Brant at Sandspit, a marina would probably have been built on their eelgrass beds. We wouldn't know about the thousands, possibly millions, of birds on the Pacific Flyway that shelter in the lee of Rose Spit, getting



The Delkatla Wildlife Sanctuary is checked more than once a day; aerial view of the sanctuary. Photo/Peter Hamel

much-needed protection from the winter southeasterlies. A sad commentary on the CBCs is that "summer scientists" who come to Haida Gwaii on contract work often dismiss the counts as simply "items in the popular press." Yet the knowledge base now, compared to what was known when we started, is enormous. Not only for us to know bird numbers and species, but to understand how close our relationship is to Alaska and the numbers of coastal birds that flow up and down the coast. Our birds are their birds. The flow is north-south, not east-west.

The Christmas Bird Count goes on. Continental Canada is a world away as Harlequin Ducks sweep north up Hecate Strait to shelter in Shingle Bay. An American Dipper feeds quietly in the Mamin River south of Port Clements, a Barrow's Goldeneye is reflected in the still waters of Chown Brooke, and a Varied Thrush scratches on the forest floor—all carelessly oblivious to the silent watchers beside them. The ebb and flow of birds on and around this archipelago continues, driven by ingrained needs, weather patterns, and humankind's alterations of the environment. And we'll hope to be here for the long run, tracking their numbers on Christmas Bird Counts on Haida Gwaii. 

Reminder

The Christmas Bird Count is always held December 14 through January 5.

To find out the date of a specific count, go to the CBC home page <www.audubon.org/bird/cbc> and click "Get Involved," or contact your local Audubon chapter or center.



Calling All Counters!

We're always looking for images to use in *American Birds*, such as photographs of birds seen during the Christmas Bird Count or participants in the field. If you would like your pictures considered for publication, please remember to send them to your count compiler or regional editor, asking them to forward the images to us. Include your name and contact information. Thank you.

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