

One Birder's Philosophy:

start with a hearty breakfast

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John S. Shackford's interest in birds began at age three. He graduated from Duke University in 1964 with a B.S. in zoology. Since 1986 he has been a freelance avian ecologist and has worked extensively on several rare species found in northwestern Oklahoma, including Mountain Plover, Lesser Prairie-Chicken, and Black-capped Vireo. His discovery that Mountain Plovers were nesting extensively on cropland in the Southern Great Plains has opened promising new possibilities for that species' conservation.

Since 1960 I have rarely missed an Oklahoma City West Christmas Bird Count. In all that time I have never heard a participant say, “Well, there’s a wasted day.” Furthermore, bad weather on count day is only discussed in terms of the heroic, as in, “This is the worst count day we’ve ever had (translation: survived)!”

Much of the lure of CBCs occurs, I believe, because counts so effectively blend the very personal and small scale with the grand, the fun with the useful. Each of us has his or her unique CBC moments and memories, but these are all grounded in the context of a gigantic endeavor. Also, there are many common threads among our individual experiences.

My own earliest CBC memories are of Mrs. J.E. (Irene) Martin starting count day by fixing an incredible breakfast. Irene began preparing it in the middle of the night so we could all get an early start. Her husband, Ed, was the compiler for the Oklahoma City count, and the couple, who had no children, began “adopting” Dr. William A. (Bill) Carter and me on count day each year, before Bill had his doctorate and before I was out of college. Bill and I would spend the night at the Martin’s and wake up to frying bacon, specially prepared eggs, toast, and jams. I have never forgotten those scrumptious meals.



The elusive Green-tailed Towhee.

then enjoy the thrill of the chase

About a decade after our breakfast tradition began, Irene uncharacteristically forgot one of the things she always did to prepare our special count morning meal. A number of years later, and before the word Alzheimer’s came into common usage, Irene would suffer a form of mental dementia from which she would never recover. Ed had died earlier, from complications after prostate surgery. At the time of his death I had been away trout fishing in Colorado, and simultaneously growing a beard I was quite proud of and determined to keep for a while. But upon returning home I learned of Ed’s death and approaching funeral. Very few things could have induced me to shave off that beard, but showing respect for my “adoptive” parents was one of them.

John Newell became our compiler after Ed died. Both John and I were originally from “back East” and we love to talk warblers. I had spent several preteen years in the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina, where I watched John’s “upstate New York” warblers moving to and from South America. After moving to Oklahoma, John quickly became a leading expert on Oklahoma birds. Whether he wanted to or not, he became

my mentor. My presence at John’s home has been so frequent over the years that one of his daughters often refers to me as her illegitimate brother, a rumor I encourage.

For many years John and his family have graciously hosted our after-count tally parties, which are always fun, classy, and relaxing affairs. At this year’s party, we had a first—perhaps a first for any Christmas Bird Count. When Brown-headed Cowbird was called for final tally and no one answered, a spontaneous cheer went up for a species we missed. This is a sophisticated group, I tell you!

One of the things I have learned from John Newell is about the “ten o’clock break” taken by many birds. John says that after most bird species feed in the morning, they tend to be full by about 10:00 A.M. Then, to catch the warmth of the morning sun in winter, they often leave heavy cover for an open spot of sunlight, where they are in plain view. Also, it is as the birds warm up in this morning sunshine that they are most likely to vocalize. Based on this I usually plan my count day to be in the field—and in the best habitat I expect to visit all day—during this 9:30 to 10:30 A.M. “sweet spot,” rather



than in the car having my own ten o'clock break of donuts and coffee. Some of my best bird finds have been the result of using John's idea. (The above assumes a cold front is not blowing in—a situation that calls for a different strategy.)

There is always something to look forward to during the count season. For a number of my CBC years, I have played what I think of as

a scouting game. From December 1 through 31 (including count day), I personally try to find 100 species within our count circle. For many years the holy grail of our count was a group total of 100 species. By count day, my personal list for December was often about 95 species, and I might add three or so during the official census, but rarely did I actually reach my goal of 100 for December. This, however, never bothered me, because by count day the listing game had morphed into what I was really after—to have a good idea of what species were present and how abundant they were. To reach 100, I could have gone to pick up, say, Vic Vacin's Eastern Screech-Owl—the one that peered out each evening from one of Vic's carefully crafted bird boxes—but someone else had already seen that bird on count day, so what was the point now? Also, there was the small matter that after count day (traditionally, ours is the first Saturday in the count period), I had yet to do any



Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*), Oklahoma City West's (OKOC) most famous CBC "saga" bird. It was first photographed on 7 February 1984 (see *Bulletin of the Oklahoma Ornithological Society*, top left). This bird has been observed on about half of the OKOC counts since the 98th CBC. Photo/John S. Shackford

Christmas shopping!

Sometimes the report of a bird on a CBC is just one piece of a saga. One of my favorite personal CBC stories is about the Green-tailed Towhee that was kind enough to jump up into a vine-covered tree for me at the Oklahoma City Zoo during the 72nd (1971–72) CBC (it was indeed during the "sweet spot," but I cannot remember if this

particular bird was before or after John's ten o'clock break lesson). John Newell accepted my report of the towhee, then the Christmas season intervened; it was after the first of the year before I could return to check on the towhee. The bird was not at its previous spot, and after a couple of trips with no luck I finally thought I saw it a hundred yards or so from the original location. But it was one of those looks that left much to be desired—Green-tailed Towhees can be very elusive. I told John about this and he said, "Now you really are seeing things!" and with that John almost convinced me too. I persisted, however, and the bird finally reappeared for my second convincing look.

The Green-tailed Towhee was hanging around a pile of discarded tree branches and weeds in a zoo maintenance area. When I told John about the bird's "habitat," he suggested I scatter birdseed near the brush pile to entice the bird into the open where I could photograph it. John's plan worked. Cedar



One of two Snowy Owls (*Bubo scandiaca*) seen on the OKOC's 75th Christmas Bird Count. Photo taken on 20 December 1974, the winter of the largest invasion of Snowy Owls ever recorded in Oklahoma (see *Bulletin of the Oklahoma Ornithological Society*, top right). Photo/John S. Shackford

limbs in the brush pile made a nice backdrop for the pictures. It was a fun experiment, watching—sometimes for several hours at a time—the sequence and timing of the several species that came to feed on the “stage.” Most operated on about a 20-minute feeding cycle, with stronger species first and on down the pecking order.

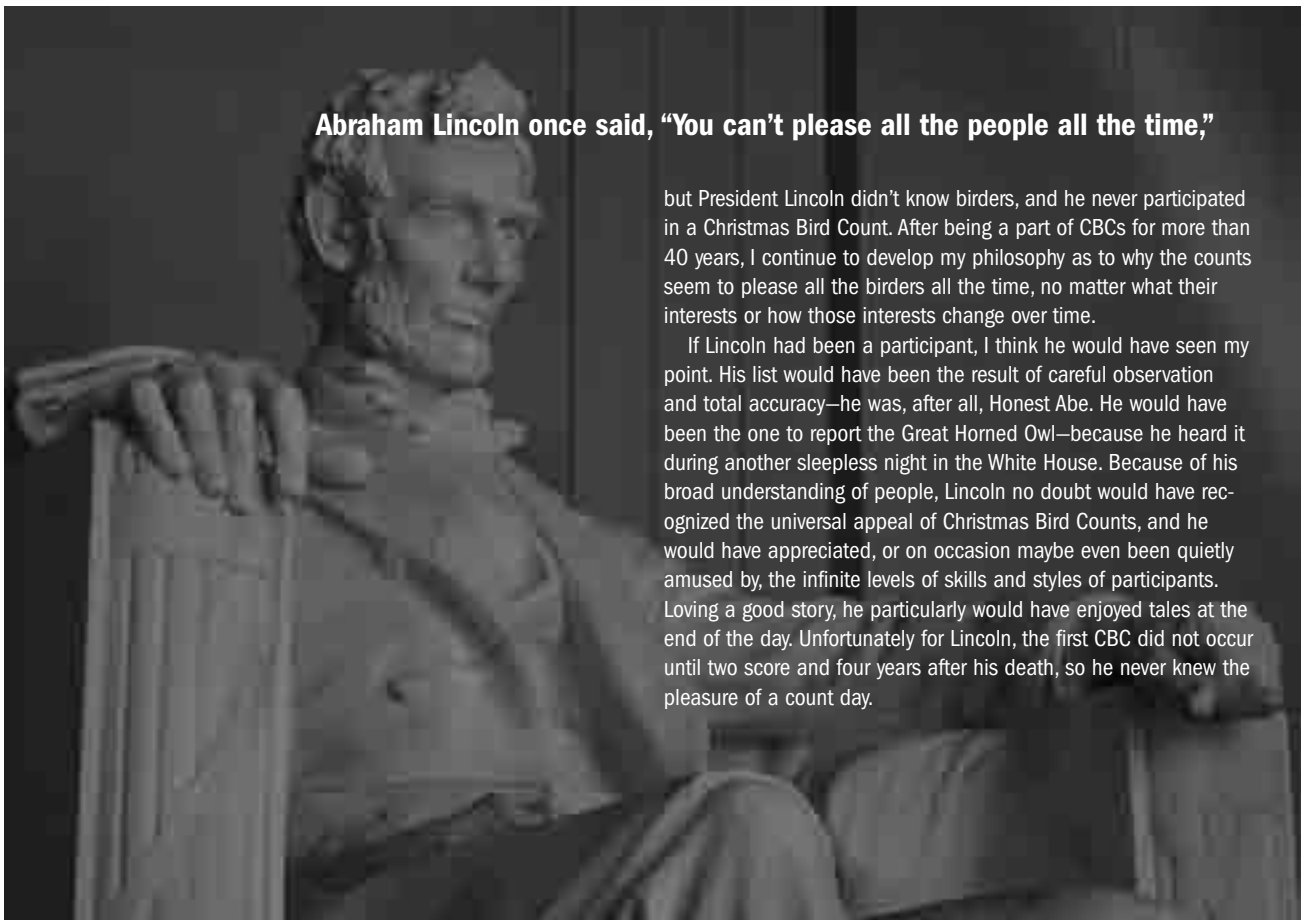
This Green-tailed Towhee was the same one I went to the University of Oklahoma to discuss with “Doc” (Dr. George M. Sutton, the well-known ornithologist). As I began the conversation, I mentioned somewhat defensively that the towhee did not seem to have any physical impairment. Doc chuckled and said, “Goodness, no!” He then explained that this might be about the healthiest Green-tailed Towhee in the world, based on the fact that it appeared to be doing just fine several hundred miles northeast of the species’ normal wintering grounds.

One of the beauties of Christmas Bird Counts is how well they include everyone interested in birds, from a true beginner to an “Einstein” biologist. For many years I debated with fellow birder John Tomer (who is an author and scholar on early naturalists visiting Oklahoma, as well as a researcher and collector of American bird prints) about the “correct” philosophy for CBCs. Tomer took a more scientific position, believing that replication is all important: the same people searching the same area using the same techniques at the same time and for the same amount of time each year. “But John,” I would plead, “everybody else focuses on maximizing species, not ‘replicating

methods,’ so your approach quite possibly results in an aberration in the data for your count.”

Since those debates with John, and as I have seen good statisticians work with CBC data, I have become increasingly convinced that differences in philosophy among different counts—no matter what they are—work out just fine, because the database is so large. So if your group takes a more scientific approach, you will get a valuable subset of data most other counts will not. If your group thrills to chasing that elusive Virginia Rail, then pull on your boots, get slogging, and you may pull in that difficult-to-find bird.

The one concern I have had in all these years has been that at some point the National Audubon Society would buy into a rigidly scientific approach for all, but they have had the wisdom, in my opinion, to forbear. If I am a biologist who usually operates upon very strict scientific standards in my own research, I can still feel at ease about my participation in a CBC. This is because I know the database is so large (each year and among years) that it will yield reliable results on population changes for most species on a continent-wide basis and beyond. If I am a lister, the CBC is a day in heaven. And if my daughter, a beginner, gets fascinated by the beauty of a cardinal at the feeder and wants to participate in the CBC, I know there is a very special place for her as well—under the wings of our gifted “old-timers.” Perhaps her first CBC will be the beginning of a long, rewarding journey.



Abraham Lincoln once said, “You can’t please all the people all the time,”

but President Lincoln didn’t know birders, and he never participated in a Christmas Bird Count. After being a part of CBCs for more than 40 years, I continue to develop my philosophy as to why the counts seem to please all the birders all the time, no matter what their interests or how those interests change over time.

If Lincoln had been a participant, I think he would have seen my point. His list would have been the result of careful observation and total accuracy—he was, after all, Honest Abe. He would have been the one to report the Great Horned Owl—because he heard it during another sleepless night in the White House. Because of his broad understanding of people, Lincoln no doubt would have recognized the universal appeal of Christmas Bird Counts, and he would have appreciated, or on occasion maybe even been quietly amused by, the infinite levels of skills and styles of participants. Loving a good story, he particularly would have enjoyed tales at the end of the day. Unfortunately for Lincoln, the first CBC did not occur until two score and four years after his death, so he never knew the pleasure of a count day.

Modern life in the United States is not well suited for creating biologists. Children generally no longer roam free—as far as their legs and bikes will take them—as my brothers and sister and I did. Added to concerns about safety, my youngest kids have television and video games, along with schooling, that consume much of their time, a situation repeated in most families, I suspect. A Christmas Bird Count, as I see it, is a rare, safe opportunity to spark a child's fascination about both the beauty of the natural world and the value of numbers to science. To restructure CBCs to be even more scientifically rigid would tend, I believe, to exclude children and other beginners. We need to encourage budding biologists in every reasonable way, and CBCs are an excellent avenue to do so. Although I do not think we are voting about CBC structure at this time, I would still like to cast my vote: if it ain't broke, don't fix it!

The Christmas Bird Counts serve science well. Recently, we had a simple demonstration of this at our local bird club meeting. Our program chairman, Warren Harden, had the idea that he and I present a program showing the Oklahoma City CBC data for each species for the last 20 years, as well as averaging this data by two 10-year intervals. No fancy statistics, just listing and averaging raw count numbers. It was amazing how swiftly all those “extralimital weirdos” our counters had worked so hard to find went out the window without a second thought. It was the population trends among the expected and newly arrived (or departed) species that held our attention now. And this simple rendition was something any biologist, I believe, could enjoy, appreciate, and find reason to reflect

upon. Is global warming really happening? Well, our Oklahoma City West CBC data support this contention, because bird ranges here, on average, appear to be shifting northward, and our once holy grail species number of 100 now stands near 120. I suggest you treat yourself to this interesting exercise with your own local bird count data.

There is a magical quality to Christmas Bird Counts that we don't often take time to define. For me, it stems not just from the birds, but from the counters, the stories, and even the yearly ritual itself. For some reason, I never got a reliable internal clock, so my days fog into weeks, months, years, decades. One of the few things related to time that I've had much continuity about in my life has been the Oklahoma City West Christmas Bird Count. Its treasure of recollections—about former counts, counters, compilers, unusual birds, unusual stories, and, most especially, companionship—is larger than almost any other I have except the one marked “family.”

As I get older, and especially since I have been organizing and compiling our count, I increasingly realize that the annual CBC offers me a window each year to view what is going on not just with the birds, but in the lives of our counters as well. For any one year this may include, sadly, a death, perhaps declining health for a few others, but also it may include such positive things as a young person getting involved because another counter has made a special effort to include him or her. In any case, for me the CBC is much larger than the birds we actually tally. It has become something of an instructor about the flow of life itself. 🐦



Green-tailed Towhee (*Pipilo chlorurus*), photographed on 27 January 1972, after originally being found at the Oklahoma City Zoo by J.S. Shackford during the “sweet spot” of the 72nd CBC (18 December 1971). Photo/John S. Shackford