



Cocoa From Birth to Bytes

The CBC Comes to Life Online

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Fifty-five years ago, famed conservationist and birder Allan D. Cruickshank negotiated with a fellow American Ornithologists Union member, Dr. Joseph Howell of Tennessee, to establish the location of a Christmas Bird Count in their favorite birding state, Florida. Neither was a Floridian, but Cruickshank lobbied strongly for the Cocoa-Port Canaveral area of Brevard County, while Howell favored the Oak Hill section of Volusia County, farther north. *continued*

David B. Freeland is co-compiler of the Cocoa, Florida, Christmas Bird Count and former compiler of the Buffalo, New York, CBC. He has been an active birder and count participant since 1951, first in Massachusetts and later in New York, Ontario, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, before settling in Florida in 2003. He is a former president of the Buffalo Ornithological Society and two separate Audubon chapters. He is presently a director of the Florida Ornithological Society.

The Cocoa CBC has a rich history of rarities that the database chronicles neatly and without fanfare.

Howell arrived in Florida first and quickly shot a note back to Cruickshank: "Cocoa!" he wrote. "Your area is far superior to Oak Hill. Meet me at the Cocoa post office." With just Cruickshank, his wife, Helen, and Howell in the field that day, the Cocoa CBC was born. Acknowledging a lack of deep knowledge of the area, they tallied just 126 species, but included were the only White-breasted Nuthatch ever seen in the history of the count and a flock of 14 Red-necked Phalaropes, a count week bird only seen once since, in 1978.

Though it is not the oldest, Cocoa is one of the most significant and historic counts of all because of Cruickshank's involvement as compiler from 1951 until 1974. Cocoa's rich history comes vividly to life through the Audubon Christmas Bird Count database, nurtured and maintained by the Audubon Science Center staff at Ivyland, Pennsylvania, a short migratory flight north of Philadelphia. As the Cocoa CBC's new compiler, anxious to compare statistics from the 106th count against its 54 previous counterparts, I found the database to be a treasure trove of information.

Were those 1710 Glossy Ibises noted by our birders a high count? Highest ever, the database showed. Had our Grasshopper Sparrow been tallied before? Twenty-seven times, but not since 1997 and only three times (plus a count week bird) in the preceding 26 years.

Many compilers surely have personal records detailing the history of their CBCs, but the Audubon database can provide statistics worthy of a close look.

Cocoa is definitely one of those counts worth careful study. A Ross's Goose that appeared last winter was the 304th countable, non-exotic species ever recorded by compilers Allan Cruickshank, Bob Barber, Marianne

Cherrington, Dick Novier, and Nedra Sekera before me and my co-compiler and colleague, Dee Fairbanks Simpson. One of the 304, Dark-eyed Junco, was a count week observation only, and there are a couple of question marks that need to be addressed, which would certainly please Florida's regional editor, Bill Pranty, if resolved. More about them momentarily.

The sidebar, "Navigating the Database," outlines how to enter the Audubon CBC database to retrieve those vital statistics. When you do, you will learn as I did a great deal of interest about your count's history. For instance, consider the following:

- Table 1 offers examples of what the data can reveal. As shown, you can track the national decline in grassland species like Field Sparrow through the Cocoa CBC's wintering data. Habitat change

has cost us several former "sure things," such as Least Bittern, now seen irregularly, and Common Ground-Dove, a regular but declining resident. The expanding range of Crested Caracara in Central Florida is illuminated, as is an increasing national population of Hooded Merganser. Yellow-throated Warbler is doing fine, but the ebb and flow of its population density is mirrored in the database.

- Semipalmated Sandpipers used to be counted routinely in winter throughout their presumed North American range. Then in the early 1970s, studies of museum skins revealed that birds marked as "Semis" were actually Western Sandpipers. After "numbering" in the thousands, Semipalmated Sandpipers dropped off the Cocoa CBC map abruptly in 1974, never to be reported again. Those old reports are suspicious at best.

To Cruickshank: "Cocoa! Your area is far superior to Oak Hill. Meet me at the Cocoa post office."



• Coming across a 1969 report of Ring-necked Pheasant, we were reminded that there may be species in the database that really shouldn't be there for other reasons. Call it "questionable countenance." Florida is not South Dakota!

• Least Tern was reported in 1954 and 1955, but the species is doubtful anywhere in the United States at that season. Misidentification? Winter rarity? Take your best guess. I'm not sure that mystery can be solved today.

• Lesser Scaup and Tree Swallow are the most abundant species in our area in winter. The wintering hordes of Lesser Scaup were estimated at 235,000 last year, a count record eclipsing 1963's 200,000. And I wonder if anyone really counted the 104,401 tallied in 1997! Tree Swallow has peaked at 50,000 in 1958, 1966, and 1973. But its numbers have been as low as 67 in 1999, and 95 in 1962. The database tells us so. Migration idiosyncrasies are evident.

• My check of the online database also uncovered a few mistakes, probably the result of inaccurate information provided from Cocoa. For example, we saw

that 2000 Black Terns, but zero Black Skimmers, were observed on the 1969 count. Black Terns ought to be in South America at the turn of the year, but Black Skimmers are numerous. Change that "Tern" to "Skimmer," folks.

Thus, the database review can be beneficial in two ways: by showcasing statistics that may be useful for local compilers and as an accuracy check of information already loaded in Audubon's computer.

There is a definite mental lift inherent in the process. The Cocoa CBC has a rich history of rarities that the database chronicles neatly and without fanfare. The count has tallied such goodies as Cinnamon Teal, Western Grebe, Bar-tailed Godwit, Dovekie, Black-chinned Hummingbird, Bewick's Wren, and the Ross's Goose that Roy Book, Kenn Allie, and I found feeding on the Sheriff's Work Farm in Rockledge last December 17. There's nothing like the thrill of a rarity to keep a birder's heart beating rapidly!

The database confirmed some other important facts for the compiler. For instance, the 2005 observation of a Red-cockaded Woodpecker was the

count's first since 1974, the Tennessee Warbler our fourth ever and first since 1978, the three Black-throated Blue Warblers our first since 1981, our Northern Rough-winged Swallow the first since 1982, and the Smooth-billed Ani the first since 1986.

It also showed some old friends we've missed for a while: Fulvous Whistling-Duck (not seen since 1983), Black Rail (1990), Piping Plover (1987), Solitary Sandpiper (1985), Long-billed Curlew (1978), Pectoral Sandpiper (1978), Pomarine Jaeger (1985), Parasitic Jaeger (1983), Glaucous Gull (1983), Gull-billed Tern (1986), Chuck-will's-widow (1985), Lark Sparrow (count week

Navigating the Database

To get a historic picture of your favorite Christmas Bird Count's data, follow these simple guidelines:

- Enter <http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc> on your Internet browser to connect to the CBC website.
- When the CBC page appears, click on "Historical Results" to the left.
- On the Historical Results page, click on "By Count Circle" at the bottom. Note that one can also click on "By Species."
- On the Count Circle page, at Step 1, choose "Option C" and enter your count symbol. For Cocoa, Florida, for example, it's "FLCO." Then click on "Find Count" to the right.
- Move down to Step 2 and use your mouse to highlight your count information—"Cocoa (FLCO)" or whatever you have selected. When highlighted, click on "Add" to the right.
- Move down to Step 3 and select a start and end year to be shown. A three-year span is a comfortable way to start, for example 97 to start and 99 to end. Then click on "Make a Table" at bottom right.
- When the next screen appears, click on "Download Data." Shortly after, (as it did on my computer) a pop-up may appear requiring a decision. If it happens to you, click on "Open."
- The coded data for all three of your chosen years will soon appear. If you are going back several years, watch for changes in species names affecting the order in which the data appears. For example, American Pipit often ended up at the very end of the list of data for Cocoa.

1985), Fox Sparrow (1981), and Dickcissel (1983). It looks like we need to search more diligently!

On the other hand, some species are relatively recent additions to the Cocoa list, such as Black-bellied Whistling-Duck (1999 arrival, now nearing 200 annually), Roseate Spoonbill (first in 1973, now up to 65), Black-necked Stilt (1987), and Lesser Black-backed Gull

(first observed in 1976, now outnumbering Great Black-backed Gull).

After a single bird was spotted in 1989, Eurasian Collared-Dove numbers exploded to more than 100 by 1993, and a count record of 923 in 2005. No telling where this tale will end, but the Audubon CBC database will always keep us mindful of its expanding numbers.

Cocoa even has records of the extinct

subspecies Dusky Seaside Sparrow, last recorded in 1964. Its memory is marked by a signpost on nearby Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge's Cruickshank Trail, named after our CBC's founder.


Try the Christmas Bird Count database if you have either a need for information or just a sense of history along with a love of birding. Its secrets are available to everyone. 

Table 1. Selected representative statistics from 55 years of Cocoa CBCs. High counts are bold-faced.

Hooded Merganser

1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959	1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966
---	---	---	28	4	12	24	14	12	6	31	6	3	16	2	2
1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982
13	8	2	10	14	12	8	1	20	3	4	10	42	20	---	---
1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
---	11	8	8	10	12	cw	4	46	41	192	90	73	109	102	114
1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005									
108	174	118	140	120	170	1250									

Least Bittern

1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959	1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966
--	2	1	3	4	3	42	8	24	7	6	9	7	4	8	12
1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982
3	2	2	3	17	25	6	5	13	8	3	4	5	4	5	1
1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
1	2	---	2	1	---	1	1	2	---	1	1	---	---	---	2
1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005									
---	1	---	---	---	3	1									

Crested Caracara

1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959	1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982
---	---	---	1	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	cw	---	---	---
1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
cw	1	1	1	1	4	cw	1	1	1	1	1	2	4	3	2
1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005									
cw	4	6	6	3	1	3									

Common Ground-Dove

1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959	1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966
26	22	46	36	64	94	152	95	94	64	74	200	310	100	110	180
1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982
81	160	150	68	72	144	64	83	46	57	117	63	61	92	91	67
1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
56	35	50	45	31	21	25	47	41	46	49	48	19	22	22	41
1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005									
41	46	17	49	31	32	7									

Yellow-throated Warbler

1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959	1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966
2	--	5	6	9	18	28	22	28	22	27	29	44	9	14	9
1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982
11	12	4	22	14	31	4	12	29	9	26	1	12	9	4	9
1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
8	8	7	5	6	7	4	4	6	7	3	10	5	1	---	---
1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005									
2	4	2	3	4	17	22									

Field Sparrow

1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959	1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966
---	---	---	14	7	12	41	28	12	7	9	58	29	27	22	15
1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982
29	62	3	9	5	19	32	8	2	6	16	2	6	1	4	7
1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
7	1	2	---	2	---	---	3	5	2	1	---	1	1	1	2
1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005									
---	1	---	---	---	---	---									