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Photo/Mickey Boisvert

A Traveling Country Doctor Shares

Chippewa Memories



It was quite flattering to be asked to contribute an article to *American Birds*; perhaps the invitation came because I have compiled Christmas Bird Counts in Wisconsin consecutively since 1954. This season we completed our annual Holcombe (35th), Chippewa Falls (54th), Durand (39th), and Nelson (46th) CBCs. I imagine the rush of excitement I still get each season is much like the one felt by my deer-hunter friends during the opening week of hunting season.

It was with great pleasure that on December 29, 2007, I celebrated my 88th birthday by doing our 39th Durand, Wisconsin, CBC. Our group typically meets on count day at the local gas station at 7:00 A.M. to see who our counters are for the day, figure out how many parties we'll have, distribute maps, etc. On this morning one young man who was home for the holidays told me, "You know on our CBC in Texas we usually, in our party alone, have 80 species by 9 A.M.!" Please don't rub it in. We'd be doing well to get 35 species by all our parties by 4:00 P.M. And when the weather is snowy and windy and below zero it can be downright brutal. Hey, this is winter in Wisconsin! So why do we do it? Good question. Well, I believe birders everywhere are dedicated. Simply put, we accept the challenge. Just because our results may seem unspectacular, they are no less significant or less important than those from other areas blessed with much higher numbers of birds and species.

I read many years ago, perhaps in the 1950s, in the Christmas Bird Count edition of *American Birds* that a gentleman on the Belmont, Massachusetts, CBC was participating on his 50th consecutive count. This happened to be a Mr. Robbins—I presume he was the father of Chan and Sam, two exceptional birders who would also inspire me during lifetime. Fifty consecutive CBCs! Wow! From that moment on I had set my goal.

It's true that as strict science, CBC efforts have a lot to be desired. Expertise ranges widely among the participants. Some are much more reliable in attention to details of mileage and time. Some are much more observant with better vision and hearing. There is variation in optical equipment. Some folks are more experienced than others and can better anticipate where and when to look for birds. And, of course, there is a large element of just plain
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Reflections of winter in Wisconsin's Chippewa County. Photo/Dr. Charles Kemper

luck, both good and bad. Even so, over the years these factors balance out, and with the tremendous number of counts and participants and great geographic range in which CBCs are conducted, the Christmas Bird Count certainly must be the greatest "citizen science" project in existence. I'm proud to be a part of that and congratulate everyone who has ever taken part.

Looking back over all these years of Christmas Bird Counts and compiling them all, certain memories stand out. I wish I could remember more of those many adventures. Unfortunately, my "living computer" (my brain) is running out of memory. Even if you don't have Alzheimer's disease, the hippocampus—the memory center in the brain—suffers inevitable shrinkage as the years go by. We all hear about and chuckle at the "old geezers" who are so forgetful. More and more I now find myself in that category. I'm very grateful for the health and energy I still have, but it wasn't by any talent or skill on my part that I have survived this long. Simple luck, genetics, and things I have no control over have allowed me to enjoy all these years. But I do curse at myself for all the time I waste looking for my glasses, my hearing aid, my car keys, etc. And I am embarrassed at least once a day by a vaguely familiar person who greets me warmly, and I don't have a clue who they are. I relate to the story about two old men who met once a week to play cards. One said to the other "I feel bad, but as long as I've known you I just can't remember your name." The other man stared back and was silent and grim for a couple of minutes. Then he answered, "How soon do you need to know?"

So it is that I find myself trying to recall some of my outstanding memories of participation in the four CBCs we do in west-central Wisconsin's northern Chippewa country, covering the Chippewa River Valley from its headwaters above Holcombe to where the Chippewa drains into the Mississippi River. This is a very impressive stretch of country. Near its source this watershed just barely touches the boreal northern forests of upper Wisconsin, then passes through the agricultural and grasslands of central Wisconsin, the bottomlands of the Chippewa River, including the large Lake Wissota, then follows through the Tiffany Bottoms State Natural Area and the coulees and bluffs of the Wisconsin Driftless Area in Buffalo and Pepin counties. Just driving the back roads, so seldom traveled, is an adventure and pleasure any time of the year.

Proceeding from north to south, we do CBCs that survey the winter bird populations in Holcombe, Chippewa Falls, Durand, and Nelson. Ornithologically speaking, compared to counts in coastal regions and even to those in southern areas of Wisconsin, our region may be perceived as dull and boring, but it is not without its dramatic moments and exciting highlights. That's one great thing about birdwatching—no matter where one is, there is almost always something unique, exciting, or challenging to see. By mid-November hereabouts, almost all neotropical migrants have—or should have—gone south. Annually we hope both for boreal species to visit our northern counts, and for laggard migrants on the two southernmost counts.

On the surface, to compare our region to many CBC locations across the Americas we are pretty humdrum. But the bottom line is that we cherish what we have. I read about the competitive nature of some counts. Which count has the most species or birds or observers? This appeals to listers, but it's not my cup of tea. My goal is to report what is here, and if there are few birds one season then that is just as significant as if there are many birds in other seasons. We

want to know how this count compares with past and future efforts. Which species are thriving? Which are not?

Having said that, I must confess I wouldn't mind being on one of those fabulous counts where they come up with 150 or more species. But I wouldn't want to compile one of those counts—only participate!

It is a long story of how I happened to come to Wisconsin, to live and practice medicine—and embrace birding. I was fresh out of World War II in the far Pacific Theater, and my wife, who was from this part of Wisconsin, led me here. I found the culture was entirely different from that of my roots in Baltimore, Maryland. Here, life's avocations were 95 percent centered around hunting, fishing, and cheering on the Green Bay Packers. Vince Lombardi was (and still is) an absolute folk hero, his picture hanging in every tavern and restaurant. Indeed some of this rubbed off on me. I tried hard to become a fisherman but had no luck. As for hunting, I enjoyed the fellowship but somehow never had the adrenalin rush that hunters get when they sight their prey. When I shot my first pheasant, I said to myself, "Now what did I do that for?" And as a medical doctor treating people with accidental gunshot wounds I became a bit averse to the sport. Admitting this publicly is, I fear, politically incorrect hereabouts. But that's how I turned to birdwatching. Unlike fishing, when I went birding I never got skunked. There was always something of interest to find.

I'm sure that many of my adventures on these counts will sound familiar to participants in other regions. How many of you have gotten stuck somewhere in the snow or mud? How many of you have been pulled out by some sort of farmer's tractor? It happened to me more than once. How many readers besides me have been interrogated by a suspicious farmer or homeowner after being found staring at his premises with binoculars? At least here in Wisconsin, this does not occur so much in the recent

years as before. Maybe in urban and suburban areas of larger towns and cities people are more sophisticated and aware of birdwatching and bird counters. Many years ago I had more explaining to do than today. There was even an episode 30 years ago when my wife at home some 50 miles away had an emergency. This was back in the days before cell phones, and she called the local sheriff. Within an astonishingly short time a sheriff pulled up beside my car on a back-country road in a distant part of the state to tell me of her call. Apparently the law had been keeping their eye on me and knew exactly where they could find me!

Back in the early days—some 55 years ago—birdwatchers in western Wisconsin were few and far between. Birdwatching as a serious pastime was nearly unheard of, and I felt self-conscious back then. Roger Tory Peterson's revolutionary *Field Guide to the Birds* had only been out a short time. The remarkable increase in numbers of birdwatchers, the improvement of optical, camera, and recording equipment, and the proliferation of sophisticated field guides was still well off in the future. Sadly, this great increase in the interest of birding has been paralleled by an overall decline in bird populations. These days more people have to travel farther to see fewer birds.

Though the memory is fading I can still recall my first CBC, in 1953 in Chippewa, my home county. I was 34 years old, it was a brand new experience, and I had no help whatsoever. My records show a 10.5-hour stint, from 6:30 A.M. to 5:00 P.M., on a typical cloudy winter day. The conditions were zero to 20 degrees Fahrenheit, north-northeast wind at five miles per hour, three inches of snow cover, and with rivers partly open and lakes and ponds solidly frozen. I was able to come up with 26 species and 987 individuals. I'm not sure whether one-participant counts qualify today as legitimate. In comparison, last year's 53rd Chippewa Falls count had 20 observers in five parties, with 40 party hours and 451 party miles. We tallied 39 species and 11,119 birds.

Some of my fondest CBC memories recall unusual or remarkable sightings. The very first Eurasian Collared-Dove sighting for me was just a few years ago in Durand, Wisconsin. At first glance, the birds looked like three more Mourning Doves, but the telltale neck markings and the rounded tails proved otherwise. The rebound of Bald Eagles from near extinction to the present day hundreds seen on the Nelson count has been spectacular, and a gratifying comeback. I recall images of a blizzard of Snow Buntings, a few soaring Golden Eagles, and huge rafts of Common Goldeneyes (and Mergansers) and Canada Geese. There was an unexpected Wilson's (then called Common) Snipe walking along a partly frozen woodland stream; rare winter waterfowl on an open golf course pond; a freshly manured field with hundreds of Horned Larks and Lapland Longspurs; and yards full of Evening Grosbeaks, Common Redpolls, and a very few exciting Hoary Redpolls. I also recall a controversial yellow and black bird that some identified as a female Northern Oriole and others as a female Western Tanager.

Almost every count has had something new to offer: a new high or a new low number of individuals, a new species for that count or a fresh sighting. This year, for example, we had during count week a Northern Mockingbird on the Chippewa Falls CBC. Unfortunately, it failed to make it to census day; it fell victim to either an *Accipiter* or a neighborhood cat the day before the count. And our Nelson count added a surprising new species this season—Red Crossbill.

The regrettable feature that stands out in my memory is the explosive housing development that has occurred here over the last half century. This blight on the landscape has accelerated at an alarming rate in the past decade. Many of our wild, beautiful, and pristine places are being swallowed up by newly developed real estate. And with that development comes highways, traffic, and increased noise. It is not a trend welcomed by the nature lover.



Wilson's Snipe (*Gallinago delicata*) in snow, Chippewa County.
Photo/Paul Blanchard

My logbooks list the details of all the counts I've compiled: all the statistics, weather, participants, etc; tables of birds seen on every single count, with maximum and minimum, when seen, etc. After listing these in the first draft of this paper, I decided those tallies and tables would probably be too pedestrian and boring to most readers who participate in far more productive and exciting CBCs. Besides, all those results can be found online now.

But I would conclude this article with one very important observation. I've already mentioned the significance of all the data we have accumulated over the years. Also important, and regrettable, are the sad trends that are all too obvious. While some species are thriving, such as the Bald Eagle, the Wild Turkey, Dark-eyed Junco, Mallard, European Starling, House Finches, and Tufted Titmouse, overall the numbers of many species of birds are dwindling. Where have all the Evening Grosbeaks gone? The meadowlarks and Red-headed Woodpeckers have pretty near vanished, at least around here. Of course each species has its own particular story.

At present I am working on a project of computerizing 50 years of daily monitoring of avian fatalities at local television towers. I then hope to be able to show population trends of migrating birds through this area. It is quite striking how this study confirms the CBC data: most birds are in trouble!

So, fellow counters, what are we going to do about it? 