

CHRISTMAS COUNTS

EDWARD J. WHELEN

As reported in the July issue, New York State lost one of its most active birders, Edward J. Whelen. As the season for Christmas bird counts approaches, it seems appropriate to reprint the following article which first appeared in the Brooklyn Bird Club's Newsletter of December 1959, written by the late Edward J. Whelen, in his own style to inform the Brooklyn Bird Club members and friends of the history and importance of Christmas bird counts and to arouse more enthusiasm among members to take part in the local Christmas count.

The purpose of printing this article is twofold; first, to show Mr. Whelen's persuasive personality and indomitable spirit which spurred the BBC to its great activity, and to arouse more federation members to take part in their local club Christmas count.

The annual Christmas Bird Count taken by National Audubon Society affiliates throughout the country . . . this year's dates are December 19 through January 1, 1963 . . . is a real blood-chilling adventure and you will not want to miss an opportunity to be a part of it. (that blood-chilling bit is sheer inspiration — no?) (Hey! I'm supposed to be promoting this census ideal!). Well, Look, It's cold out, at that time of year, and we don't want to suggest that it's a picnic. Wait! Let's start over.

We want to give you a run-down on the Sport of Kings. Away back at the turn of the Century, "Bird Lovers" were waxing wroth at the way the hunters were playing a game of going afield at Christmas time, of seeing how many birds (any kind of birds) they could "bag" in a day of shooting. In those beknighted days, before Teddy Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot began to preach Conservation, all birds were fair game. "Four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie" was not only a nursery rhyme but a sad reality — with thrushes, shorebirds, and chickadees in the pot-pie just for seasoning, like olives in a martini. The Bird lovers tried to shame these butchers of songbirds and they instituted a game of their own — a Christmas Bird Count.

They went into the field and built up a list of "birds seen" and *not* shot. Most of the lists submitted to the newspapers, were "unbelievable" — according to the Rod and Gun Editors and the bird lovers were called such gentle terms as cross-eyed liars, idiots, etc. "Why everybody knows that the wrens ride south on the backs of geese, and Tree Swallows all hibernate in mud-banks — except for those that winter on the moon!" — sample of comment from Police Gazette. "No wonder they see so many birds! They call sparrows by a dozen names, towhees, juncoes, white-throats, song, seaside — the way they split hairs over the names of birds, it's no wonder they see 50 species! They're all snowbirds, everyone knows that."

But, along about 1910 when our private enterprise system got into high gear and a shotgun shell cost too much to waste on a flock of sparrows — the hunters stopped shooting so many and at the same time a lot of folks were becoming interested in just looking at birds — they were just "bird watchers."

That was during the "Age of Sneers" when all progressive people were called "suffragettes, teetotalers, conservationists, Audubonists or anarchists (the labor unionists)". So birdwatchers too, received the barbed tongue and acid pen treatment. Lots of old time "butchers" are still around and we still note a hangover of the "sneerers". Bird watchers! Phooey!

However, bird clubs and Audubon Society units were getting out at Christmas time and bringing in some amazing records of wintering birds, and so discovering some facts about bird migration and the wintering range of species. Colleges were turning out specialists in birds and "Game Management." Experts were considered to know more about Game Birds than the best shotgun man in the blind. (This last was hard to get down and some gunners would as soon shoot a bird expert as a protected duck.)

Fortunately or unfortunately, — since in America we need a disaster to arouse the General Public — we found that some species of birds were already extinct and others were on the verge of being wiped out. Carolina Parakeets, Passenger Pigeons, Great Auks, and the Heath Hens were all gone and it was noted that egrets, terns and even the lowly "sea gull" was about to disappear. With the Audubon Society leading the fight, and with adequate protection given to nesting areas, these birds were saved.

Conservation, became a magical word, and as all politicians are against sin, when the good old General Public demanded some protection for birds, and an answer to the question "Why are birds becoming extinct?" the laws were passed — a couple of laws to save the birds and then the politicians went back to log-rolling. The Public? As usual it had done its duty and saved the birds and then had gone back to sleep. The Birders, Conservationists and even the old time bird Lovers were grateful for the victory. The Christmas Bird Count became an institution — a means for checking on the occurrence of birds in winter.

The Bird Enthusiast who will rise at dawn, in winter, and spend the day in the field, until darkness blinds his binoculars is a rare bird indeed. Every bird club has a couple of them and there are a lot of "lone wolves" who want no part of a bird club as such but who are friendly souls who will help a beginner to see his first rarity — and assist a bird club in taking the Christmas Count. Without the help of these strong silent men, the average bird club would miss a lot of good birds. We will never be able to evaluate fully the contributions of such men (and women) as we speak of here. Many club trips go to places to see birds that were found and reported by them. The full coverage of an area is their life work and we reap the harvest of the good finds they have made.

So, now let's get censusing! The purpose as we see it, is to obtain data on the winter range of birds, and to discover the "casualties of the migration" type of wintering-over birds. Some birds become injured or sick and they drop out of flights and then they are faced with the problem of remaining alive until the return of spring. On our Christmas count we come up with many such birds — birds that are not supposed to be here, but down in Florida or Mexico. Usually these birds are unable to survive for long in the rigorous conditions of our winter, but they seek shelter in

thickets, ravines, marshy or swampy areas and try to survive. Sometimes they are lucky and find a feeding station, and they stay near by and so are regularly reported, but most often they hide in brush piles remote from people and they are normally overlooked. We try to find them and so tally another species. Such birds as thrushes, thrashers, catbirds, phoebes, orioles, Tree Swallows, warblers and towhees are in the group we refer to here.

Then there are the Northern birds which migrate "south" to winter locally. White-throats, juncos, other sparrows, chickadees, nuthatches, siskins, crossbills, goldfinches, are the hardy and half hardy birds that we regularly list each winter. Some "unusual" birds — owls and hawks, eiders, bay and sea ducks, plus the sanctuary waterfowl, make up a large segment of our list.

Some birds are "permanent residents", they occur on a year-round basis; Song Sparrows, Cardinals, Sparrow Hawks, Short-eared Owls, Horned Larks and Gulls. We know where to look for these birds and find them regularly.

Now, who does it? Who are these avid souls, who wade through half frozen marshes, beat through the poison ivy, who (Eee-gad) brave some ice-covered jetty to seek the eiders, the Oldsquaws, the Harlequin Duck or the feeding Gannet ??? Who?

YOU — yes, you, are needed. We want everyone to come out on count day. Rain or shine, or — Br-r-r SNOW.

So — come to your club meeting and accept an assignment.

Maybe you will receive a medal — HERO OF THE — Club."

Ed. note. Permission to reprint this article was given by Mrs. Edward J. Whelen, 971 East 34th St., Brooklyn 10

CLUB NEWS

The Buffalo Audubon Society cordially invites you to the

Harold D. Mitchell, Testimonial Dinner

In the Museum of Science, Humboldt Pkwy., Buffalo, N. Y.

November 16, 1963

Roger Tory Peterson — Guest Speaker

Reservations may be made by mailing your check or money order for ten dollars (\$10.00) to Miss Margaret Wendling, 87 Garrison Road, Williamsville 21, New York. Make your reservations early — facilities are limited to 400.

In approving his testimonial dinner, Mr. Mitchell has pledged the proceeds to the Beaver Meadows Wildlife Refuge Fund. Souvenir programs will list names of patrons or friends of Audubon who contribute \$5.00 or more toward the Fund. This contribution may be sent along with your reservation to Miss Wendling.

Gertrude G. Webster, Chairman of Publicity Committee.