

BIRD COUNTS IN WESTERN NEW YORK

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Two founding members of the Buffalo Ornithological Society, Clark Beardslee and Harold D. Mitchell, gave the club a serious direction soon after its organization in October 1929, by proposing to use its compiled bird records as a basis for a projected book on the ornithology of the region. Thus, from the beginning the BOS established a pattern of regular bird counts, beginning with the Christmas Count of 1929, and encouraged members in the pursuit of their avocation, which for many of them became practically a way of life.

At first, a program of regular monthly counts was established on a quite informal basis, each member going to some favorite birding spot. After 1939, these informal counts were replaced by regularly scheduled field trips, generally two a month. Three censuses in addition to the Christmas Count were, however, retained: the Spring Duck Census in early April, the Annual Spring Census on the third Sunday in May, the Fall Duck Census in October. Later the word "Duck" was dropped from the names, as each census became a count of individuals of all species seen, and the counts are now simply designated by the month in which they take place. Observers no longer casually choose a favorite spot. At a club meeting they volunteer for or are assigned to definite territories, and part of a later meeting is devoted to a report of the count. This report, including species and numbers as well as names of all participants, is published in *The Prothonotary*, along with comments by the over-all compiler of the census.

Following the Federation's division of the state into new reporting regions, effective in April 1954, the society divided the large Western New York study area assigned to it into 23 fairly equal sections, plus 5 more on the Canadian side of the river. A road map was devised for each section, and a folder containing all the maps given to each member. Coverage is as thorough as is possible with the available number of observers, most of whom make a day of it. They cover as much of the road mileage as they can and investigate on foot all the known good birding spots. If enough are available, observers of a given area divide into two or more small parties, which are then able to "beat the bushes" more thoroughly. Although observers usually choose territories with which they are familiar, it sometimes becomes necessary for someone to cover an unfamiliar area. For this reason one present BOS project aims to have each section written up by someone who knows it well to enable all members to conduct observations profitably in any part of the study area. Richard Rosche's recently published *Birds of Wyoming County* is an example of what can be done to help observers in a given territory.

The BOS now makes seven counts a year as well as several informal ones. Participation has grown from seven observers in three parties on that first Christmas Count to as high as 135 observers, the number of parties being determined by how many people a compiler can persuade into his area. To the four counts mentioned earlier a Shorebird Count was added in 1947 and a Waterfowl Count in mid-January 1955 as part of the state-wide count by the Federation. Less formal hawk counts in spring and fall and various breeding bird and nesting counts are conducted. In June 1966 cooperation was begun in the Breeding Bird Survey recently inaugurated by the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The area is fortunate in having lake shore accessible for a Shorebird Count in summer and early fall when numbers are greatest. Fifty-four miles of the north shore of Lake Erie are covered once a year, each participating party walking a 4-7 mile section of the shore, recording numbers and species and spotting on a map where the birds were. For the first five consecutive years the census was taken on a day in early August, for the second five years in late August, for the third five years in early September, and for the fourth five years in late July. In the September 1966 issue of *The Prothonotary*, Edward Seeber presented and discussed the data in an article, "Twenty Years of Shorebird Counts."

Although sponsored by the BOS, the counts may be assisted by persons other than the local members. In an early issue of *The Prothonotary* a note was added to an announcement of the Fall Census: "It is desirable to cover as much of our territory as possible on this day. Members of neighboring bird clubs are cordially invited to take part in the census with us." How well that invitation of thirty-five years ago has been accepted! Groups from Batavia (since 1934), from Thorold and vicinity in Canada, and from Fillmore cover nearby territories. As bird clubs have been organized in Western New York, they have taken over responsibility for the counts in their areas: Jamestown Audubon Society, Lake Erie Bird Club, Allegany County Bird Club, East Aurora Bird Club, Cattaraugus County Bird Study Group.

Records to be used as a basis for an authoritative study in the ornithology of a region have to be accurate. From the beginning all unusual reports of either species or numbers had to be presented to a committee of statisticians who either accepted or rejected the observation on the basis of a detailed report. In time a verification form (see below) was developed to guide the observer in studying his rarity in the field as well as in writing up his observations. On the basis of this written verification the statisticians judge the accuracy of the identification, and only those sightings which have on file a satisfactory written verification become a part of the record of the region.

In 1955 the society published a *Date Guide*, giving the dates within which a species may be reported without this written verification, these dates having been determined by the accepted records of previous years. Birds which have been reported only infrequently — that is, not often enough to establish a definite period of residence or migration — are listed without dates, and reports of these must *always* be accompanied by a written verification. The *Date Guide* is revised every five years to conform to changes in nomenclature as authorized by the AOU and to changes of the status of birds within the area.

With the publication in 1964 of Beardslee and Mitchell's *Birds of the Niagara Frontier*, some might think that the need for our many bird counts has disappeared. However, as every ornithologist knows, change is the order of bird life too. Already several birds not mentioned in the book have been found in the area since the date of publication, and new records of early and late migrants and of abundance occur each year. There is never a time to stop learning, and with the recent increased interest in the abundance of birds this is no time to stop counting.

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INFORMATION ON BONAPARTE'S GULLS REQUESTED

Joanna Burger and Richard Brownstein of Buffalo are working on the distribution and migratory behavior of the Bonaparte's Gull. Any data from personal records on the distribution and movement of these gulls would be helpful. The direction, date, time and location of their movements would be especially useful. Some of these gulls in Buffalo have been dyed a bright color and banded. The color of the dye used denotes the date of the marking session. If you see any unusually colored Bonaparte's Gull, please send the following information to the address listed below: Date, Location, Color, Number of marked individuals, Number of Unmarked Bonaparte's Gulls with the color-marked gulls.

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