

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

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When the National Audubon Society stopped printing complete data for Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs) after the 101st CBC (2001/02), several concerns were raised by producers and users of CBC data. The electronic database from which the data must now be accessed (<http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc/>) provides many conveniences for researchers, notably the ability to view many years' data for a given CBC in tabular form and the ability to search world-wide for counts of a given species. Nevertheless, many difficulties inevitably arise when maintaining and using such a huge source of information, and some of these problems have been greatly exacerbated by the discontinuation of printed data. Several of these problems are discussed below.

No fewer than 72 CBCs were conducted wholly or partly in New York State during the 2004/05 season. The abiding interest of New York birders in this program, coupled with the serious consequences following the discontinuation of print publication, stimulated the plan to publish traditional CBC data for New York count circles in *The Kingbird*. Conversations with long-time participants, followed by more formal discussions with CBC compilers, Kingbird Regional Editors, NYSOA officers, and the CBC staff at National Audubon Society, revealed not only the feasibility of doing so, but also an untapped wealth of energy and enthusiasm for this undertaking.

The following is a discussion of several of the problems associated with the present, exclusively electronic access to CBC data. Perhaps the first thing that many people noticed when the traditional CBC issue was discontinued, was the prohibitive difficulty of browsing through multiple counts for species or fellow citizen scientists of interest to them. Whereas it was once a pleasurable thirty second exercise to learn whether Bohemian Waxwings were present on various upstate New York CBCs during a particular winter, or to check whether an old friend was still counting Boreal Chickadees in New Hampshire, these simple tasks now require a series of pre-planned, often grueling internet sessions. Even worse, the hundreds of unfamiliar counts, once a rich source of interest and information literally at one's fingertips, are now prohibitively difficult to browse. To find the results of a count that one does not already know about on the electronic database requires navigating a series of browser commands, all of which must be repeated from scratch to find the next new count. Essentially every CBC aficionado with whom I have spoken has shared a sense of frustration and disappointment over this sort of inconvenience.

But the loss of complete hard copy results has had consequences far beyond mere convenience. Whereas a fundamental mission of the CBC program is to monitor winter bird populations, users might be dismayed to learn how very difficult—or even impossible—it can be to answer even the simplest queries

through the database. 'Dismay' is the only word I can use to describe my feeling when I discovered, in the historical database for the Southern Nassau County CBC, such bizarre entities as 'bittern species' and 'black-backed gull species.' I have personally known several of the pioneering birders on this count well enough to doubt that they ever saw a bird in Nassau County that they recognized as a bittern, but somehow could not identify beyond that! To make matters worse, 'bittern species' was found in more than one year, and as many as 191 'black-backed gull species' were tallied on a single count.

The answer to this puzzle is, of course, that observers and compilers in the 1930's could not imagine seeing a Least Bittern on a CBC, nor could they anticipate that within a few decades Lesser Black-backed Gulls would be eagerly sought and found on their count circles. Rather, they reported their big bitterns as Bitterns and their coffin-backs as Black-backed Gulls. Retrofitting these records into the electronic database is a serious information-technological challenge, and the present solution has been to shoe-horn them into generic categories, along with many other such curiosities, including 'phoebe species'—all of which were actually precisely identified at the time, as a quick glance at the dog-eared pages of *Bird Lore* will instantly prove.

This problem is not a mere inconvenience; it is an almost intractable obstacle to simple data analysis. If one wanted to chart the increase in wintering numbers of Great Black-backed Gulls on Long Island during the last century, one wouldn't find any at all in the database until some time after Lesser Black-backed Gulls began appearing in North America, forcing compilers to begin reporting the common species under its full English name. Records from earlier years would have to be deliberately retrieved under 'black-backed gull species' and then integrated in the analysis by brute force. Even worse, some birds continue to be reported under different names from year to year, even on the same count. For instance, one of Long Island's most numerous waterfowl, Brant (*Branta bernicla*), appears in the database under no fewer than eight names. 'Brant,' 'Brant (*hrota*),' 'Brant (*nigricans*),' 'White-bellied Brant,' 'Black Brant,' 'American Brant,' 'Black Sea Brant,' and 'Pacific Black Brant.' A researcher wishing to analyze data for this species has no choice but to make separate queries for every one of these names, download the results of each query, and integrate the multiple data sets. The last task is extremely difficult because some of the names in question are simple synonyms, whereas others (e.g., 'Brant' and 'Brant (*hrota*)') overlap only in part. These ambiguities were formerly easily resolved by recourse to the published data, in which nobody could mistake the continuity between the 20,000 'Brant' reported on a count one year and the 17,000 'Brant (*hrota*)' reported there the next year, or what was meant by 3 'Towhees' on a New York CBC. The tabular output currently available from the electronic database is another matter altogether, and even after laborious mining and reprocessing, many simple questions remain essentially impossible to answer.

The problems described so far are restricted to a few of those that are inherent in the electronic-only system as it is designed to function, but unfortunately, this system does not always function even this well. I can do no better than to quote from Louis Bevier's Central and South America Regional Summary for the 104th CBC (*American Birds* 58: 105): "The bad news:

Compilers in Latin America had to overcome a chaotic online interface. These problems remained even after most North American counts had been fixed, and review was equally frustrating. Behind the scenes, the CBC database appears to store data correctly, but online, lists are still disorganized for most counts in this region. I have made a strenuous plea for the data entry program to be fixed, and for CBC results to be published as they once were. The importance of printed, published results cannot be overstated and become especially needed when electronic access is uncertain.”

The data presented in this issue are far from perfect, but it is my hope that they will be a source of information and pleasure for present and future readers of *The Kingbird*.



Northern Shrikes are sought after birds on New York Christmas Bird Counts. During the winter of 2004/05, this species was found in better than average numbers on many upstate counts, but it was scarce to absent downstate.

Cedar Beach, Suffolk County, 30 Oct 2004. S.S. Mitra.