



The Stilt

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Newsletter of the Bridgerland Audubon Society

Thousands of Birds, One Cold Day

Ah the charms
of an early
winter

morning: tiny, crystal flakes sinking slowly through dark, frozen air; the still blanket of glowing white, hiding all of earth's imperfections with soft night shadows; and the calm, echoing silence of the frozen, sleeping night. The moon falls, replaced by sleepy streaks of sunlight that warm the pale landscape with a golden glow. From far off, the crunch of boots on snow approaches the annual lookout point for one of a century's Christmas Bird Counts. Noses and fingertips are numb, but binoculars are ready as 50 to 60 faithful BAS members make their way to designated areas in Hyde Park to count birds.

This has been a scene recognized by Audubon Birders for 102 years nationally, 42 years locally, as the annual Christmas Bird Count (CBC). This year's count, the 43rd annual, will be held on Saturday,

December 14th. As usual, birders will start early counting owls and then moving on to any other fowl one can spot for the rest of the day. Half-time at lunch calls for the sharing of success stories and reorientation to the job. In the evening, a traditional potluck dinner is arranged to defrost the frozen birders and compile the collected data.

Some of our dedicated BAS members have been participating in the local CBC for years. I'm a new member myself and truthfully, the whole idea had me curious. (So you just sit in the cold and count birds all day?) I got the feeling that there must be more to it than that. I mean, this thing has been going on for a hundred years. So I asked a few veteran bird counters to share some close-to-home experiences of what the CBC is really about.

Sue Drown, of the North Logan CBC route, relates a story of one of those unreal, pristine scenes that must make the long, cold birding hours worth it.

"The elusive flock of rosy finches remains a CBC pearl. It's usually reserved for the truly intrepid, like John & Terry Barnes and others who actually leave the warmth of their cars and venture for extended distances where few, but special, birds can be found. This year, it was very foggy, like what you find skiing when you are encased in a winter cloud. Then, through the cloud we saw another, darker, whirling cloud against the white. We followed it as best we could and finally, we met it, and it came alive as a flock of at least 1,000 rosy finches, on the road, shifting here and there, lifting and resting, a cloud of life within a cloud of winter."

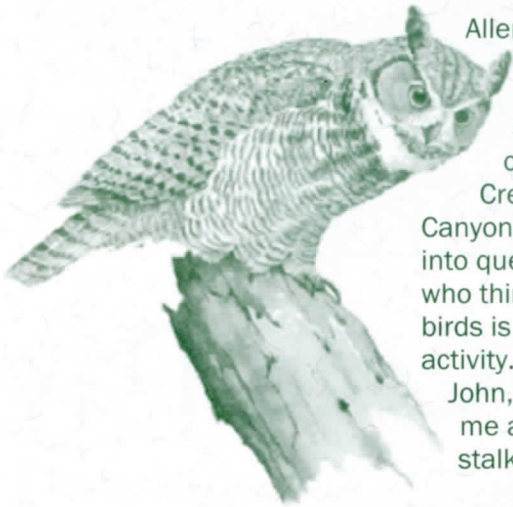
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CBC

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Allen Christensen is one of those intrepid birders Sue spoke of. He covers Birch Creek up Smithfield Canyon. His story calls into question anyone who thinks that counting birds is a low-adventure activity. "My friend, John, was talking to me about being stalked by a cougar.

"He told me about how this cougar had come up to within 35 feet of him. I know that cats are pretty curious animals and curiosity can bring them really close.

About 2 weeks later it was time for the Christmas Bird Count and I went to the counting area I always do. I started off by myself at 3 a.m. I was going owl-ing. There was a good moon. The temperature was about zero. I started up the roadway, parked my truck a little low, and climbed the fence.

By this time it's 4:30 or so, and I'm getting higher in the mountains, about a mile away from my car. It's a wonderfully beautiful morning. I'm enthusiastic. I'm skiing, working hard and on the edge of being cold because of all the stopping I have to do. Maybe a mile and a half away

from the gate, I look down in the moonlight on the snow and I see cougar tracks enter the [trail] and I think, "Wow! That's neat, there's a cougar track." As I ski along it leaves the [trail] and I stop and call owls. I almost don't pay it any mind at all.

It continues much the same way. The cougar tracks come back. It's about 8 a.m.; the light is up. It's not full light, but it's light enough that I can see the track is fresh. I take my glove off and reach down and touch the track. The track is really soft. It hasn't had a chance to change much and I think, "Wow, I am within 15 minutes of that cougar."

This time when it left the track it walked into a deep snow. As it was going uphill it would press its feet forward into the snow and expose its claws. This gave me a real good look at the structure of this cat's foot and how big it was. That was the first time I felt like "You know, I should be a little careful. I'm 4-5 miles away from anybody." You know it's just paranoia. That's a big cat. I know which side of the trail it's on now and I'm a little paranoid about this thing.

I continue. A few less owls now. I check for

other kinds of birds and I'm doing the survey going up the canyon. The tracks are back and sure enough, they are sterling fresh. I'm not really making any noise other than natural noises and I'm not doing much of that, just skiing up in the deep snow by myself.

Now we come to a rise; the cougar tracks go over the rise and down into a little crossing where the creek comes up in the road. I watched the tracks go right down to the creek. I took off my skis. I knew I was close. I didn't know quite what to do but I thought my skis would be my best weapons (not on my feet but in my hands). So I took the skis and walked down to the river and saw where the cat had been drinking. The cat had pushed down the ice shelf as it leaned forward to get a drink. I thought, "If my skills in touching the freshness of animals in snow aren't very good, this will be the test." I reached down where the ice had been broken into the running water and lifted it up. There were no molecules that weren't there.

I noticed that when the cat left, he left in a hurry, to my left. He looked like he'd been startled. So I got my binoculars out and climbed

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Audubon Calendar

December 2002

4 BAS Board of Trustees Meeting. The BAS Board of Trustees holds its regular monthly meeting Wednesday night at 7 p.m. at the offices of Bio-Resources, 135 E. Center, Logan. All interested are invited to attend.

12 BAS General Meeting with Luke Smith, Falconer and Wildlife Educator. Come get up close and personal with a Harris hawk, gyre falcon and a great-horned owl. Luke Smith, falconer and wildlife educator, will be showing off these birds and talking about their ecology. Bring the young birders to this meeting for a bird's eye look at these magnificent creatures! Luke and his birds have been traveling to area schools for several years now, working to teach young people about importance and beauty of birds of prey. The meeting will be held at the Logan City meeting room, 255 N. Main at 7 p.m. All are welcome.

14 Annual Logan Christmas Bird Count. A tradition in England since 1900, the Christmas Bird Count (CBC) is now held in many areas of the United States, and has been held in the same area in Cache Valley for over 20 years. Last year we counted over 20,000 birds and about 90 species. Teams are assigned particular areas, and some folks start before dawn and go until dark. However, participants are welcome even if they can take part for only a few hours. Inexperienced birders are welcome; they will be paired with an experienced birder. A potluck dinner is held afterwards, where we go over the numbers and species of birds we saw. Please come join us. The more participants we have, the more fun we have and the more accurate and complete our count is. If you can help out, call Dr. Keith Archibald, 752-8258. If you want to participate but don't have binoculars, don't let that stop you; Call Dick Hurren (435) 734-2653, and he will find a pair you can borrow for the day.

21 Field Trip to Locations of Rare/Unusual CBC Birds Sightings. Join us as we go back to some of the spots where rare or unusual birds were spotted during the CBC. No promises can be made that the birds will still be there, but often they are. For further info, call Dick Hurren (435) 734-2653



If you'd like to come along on a field trip but do not have binoculars, call Dick Hurren (435) 734-2653. He'll find a pair for you to use.

National Notes

Act for the Birds

We have a window of opportunity. Today, the vast majority of the species of birds in North America still exist in viable numbers in some remnant of suitable habitat. Today, we who love birds and the natural world in general exist in greater numbers than ever before, and those numbers are growing rapidly. And today, we have the tools that allow us to know and monitor that fragile world with depth and breadth that was unimaginable 10 years ago, let alone 102 years ago when the first Christmas Bird Count (CBC) was held. With these elements in place, we are all able to participate in conservation efforts. In fact, it is our mandate – our obligation – to become citizen scientists.

Over one hundred years ago, a handful of Christmas Bird Counters began a tradition by recording the species and their numbers in 25 circles around the conti-

ment. This year you can be among the tens of thousands who gather data in some of those same circles and in over 1900 additional sites. But now, rather than waiting months to enjoy or study those data, you'll be able to see the results as soon as they are entered into the on-line database. And right now 102 years of reports are available for many uses, but especially conservation. Using this immense vault of CBC data (found at <http://audubon.org/bird/cbc/hr/index.html>), you can now conduct your own local, regional, or national study with relative ease. Please tell us what you find.

More than 15 years ago, Project FeederWatch (visit <http://www.birdsource.org/pfw>) became a continent-wide project sponsored by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, the Canadian Nature Federation, Bird Studies Canada, and National Audubon. Following a careful protocol, thousands of dedicated observers – some elderly, some housebound – have collected data about the

status of feeder birds across the continent from November through April. When participants reported an illness among House Finches, the network of Feeder-Watchers made it possible to track the disease, identified as avian conjunctivitis, as it spread throughout the eastern half of the country. Additionally, the huge amount of data gathered during this project is precious to the understanding of climate's impact on bird populations as well as of the general health of these populations. All of this information is now submitted and quickly available on-line.

The Great Backyard Bird Count or GBBC (available at <http://www.birdsource.com/gbbc/>) will be 6 years old this February 14-17. Submitted entirely on-line, the approximately 50,000 checklists from every state and province provide a winter snapshot of the status of our birds on that count weekend. A monitoring project that is designed



to allow beginners and experts alike to participate, GBBC aims to engage and educate families and individuals in the hopes that they will continue their involvement through other bird monitoring projects. As with other projects, GBBC data become more and more valuable with each year that the information is compiled. Explore the results from your state or province, a region of the continent, or all of North America.

When we began to receive letters, emails, and phone calls in August about dwindling bird numbers in a variety of neighborhoods around the east and mid-west, we were alarmed and concerned. These reports seemed to coincide with the spread of the West Nile Virus. As this year's warm months came to an end, we could do little but provide information (available at <http://audubon.org/bird/westnilevirus.html>), caution against inappropriate reactions like rampant pesticide application, and educate regarding alternative responses. We had no broad scale, summer

monitoring data for comparison to recent 2002 surveys.

However, this winter, we can all do much more. While no one was thinking of a scenario like the West Nile threat when these citizen science monitoring projects were developed, in the end, we have built a platform for an informed response to just such an event. The winter projects are in place and years of data have been collected.

So let's use these tools to learn as much as possible about the impact of this disease on our winter bird populations as we continue to collect long-term data. It is, of course, critically important that we maintain the same protocol as in previous years when we collect data this winter.

Heading into the future, take a look at eBird (available at <http://www.birdsource.org>), a new BirdSource tool that allows anyone to report any species, anywhere, and anytime. eBird opens a new era of citizen science when we can have all of the baseline data as they are

needed, which will help our birds in a time of increasing threats from habitat loss to West Nile virus. All citizen scientists can participate in eBird and other projects through BirdSource at their level of expertise and as their time allows.

The window of conservation opportunity through which we gaze must become a door through which we step into action. Report banded, tagged, and marked birds as well as your observations of rarities and unusual occurrences. Get involved with your local Important Bird Area program <http://audubon.org/bird/iba/index.html>, helping to monitor birds at some of their most important places. And participate in citizen science projects at your level of ability and comfort. Remember, you will double your impact if you take along a friend; and you'll multiply it many times over if you include a scout troop or a class of kids.

—Sally Conyne
Director, Citizen Science
National Audubon
Science Office



State Notes

Still Seeking Nominations for Utah's Important Bird Area Program

Have you ever seen a sharp-tailed grouse?

In Cache County there used to be "thousands of these chickens until about 1875 when they began to dwindle." Now sharp-tailed grouse occur in only 5 percent of their historic range. In



1935 the sharp-tailed grouse statewide fall population was estimated at 1,500 birds. In large part due to the Conservation Reserve Program, the statewide fall population in 1999 was estimated at 10,782 birds. (Source: *Strategic Management Plan for Colombian Sharp-tailed Grouse*, Division of Wildlife Resources, June 11, 2002.)

While the details haven't been worked out and the landowners would need to agree, eastern Box Elder County could be an Important Bird Area (IBA) site because this is the area most heavily used by sharp-tailed grouse in Utah.

Eastern Box Elder County is just one of many potential Important Bird Area sites for Utah. Perhaps you know an area that you think should be an IBA site.

Last May the nomination forms and criteria for the Utah IBA program were established. Since then, with the help of numerous individuals, many potential IBA sites across the state have been mentioned.

Val Grant, chair of the Utah IBA Technical Team (and President of Bridgerland Audubon Society) asked at the Nov. 14 Technical Team meeting that IBA sites be nominated by Feb. 15. After nominating a site, the technical team will review the nomination form and ensure that the site meets the Utah IBA criteria including such things as bird use and landowner permission. Although nominations for IBA sites will always be encouraged, an effort will be made to take the sites nomi-

nated by February 15 and have them ready for public announcement in May 2003.

Individuals and groups are definitely encouraged to nominate a site. If you are wondering whether someone is already nominating a site please contact me at wmartinson@audubon.org or (801) 355-8110. The easiest place to get the nomination form and criteria, as well as a fuller explanation about the IBA program is on the web at www.audubon.org/bird/iba/utah.

In coming months more information will be provided about the IBA program and individual IBA sites. Also, please let me know if you would like to receive updates regarding the Utah IBA program via e-mail.

—Wayne Martinson,
Utah Important Bird
Areas Coordinator
National Audubon Society

CBC

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the hill a little bit at his tracks. They went into a thicket. I swept the thicket completely; there was nothing coming out of that thicket. So I put my skis back on and kept going higher into the mountain.

I kept checking the place. When I came back I saw tracks leaving that thicket. That whole time he was watching me. It was fun."

There may be discussion on whether or not being tracked by a cougar is fun, but it certainly is an adventure unexpected in the context of bird counting.

It's a cold job, but somebody's got to do it. If you are new or not so new to BAS and are interested in participating in this year's count, contact Keith Archibald, 752-8258.

He can let you know where to go and what to do.

To help cover the cost of compiling, there is a small fee of \$5.00, with those under 18 free.

Oh, and don't forget the potluck that evening! This year's potluck will once again be at the home of Susan and David Drown, 1776 East 1400 North in Logan, 752-3797, and will begin at 6 p.m.

The evening wraps up with the traditional compilation reports where we total up all the spe-

cies — the hits and the misses — and share the joy of being actively involved in the conservation of birds.

Don't wonder what all the bird-counting fuss is about anymore. Come out and experience it for yourself this year. Adventure, beauty and camaraderie await you.

—Joyce McMullin

Bridgerland Audubon contacts

Trustees

- 2000-2003 Mae Coover, 752-8871; Ron Goede, 752-9650
Teri Peery, 753-3249
- 2001-2004 Merr Lundahl, 753-1707; Dave Drown, 752-3797;
Jack Greene, 563-6816
- 2002-2005 Jim Cane, 713-4668; Joyce McMullin, 713-4399;
Dick Hurren 435/734-2653; Jamie McEvoy, 753-3559

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Membership in the Bridgerland Audubon Society includes a subscription to *The Stilt*, as well as *Audubon* magazine. The editor of *The Stilt* invites submissions, due on the 15th of each month. Send to stiltnews@hotmail.com.

National Audubon Society Chapter Membership Application

Yes, I'd like to contribute to Audubon and receive the Bridgerland Audubon newsletter, *The Stilt*, and the *National AUDUBON* magazine, as a:

- New member of the National Audubon Society and Bridgerland Audubon.
- Renewing member of the National Audubon Society and Bridgerland Audubon.

My check for \$ _____ is enclosed (\$20 membership dues)

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ ZIP _____



Please make all checks payable to National Audubon Society and send with this card to:
National Audubon Society
Membership Data Center
PO Box 51001
Boulder, CO 80322-1001
W-52 Local Chapter Code: 7XCHA

Note to new National Audubon members: To get on *The Stilt* newsletter mailing list without the usual 8 week delay, contact Susan Durham, 753-5637, sdurham@cc.usu.edu.

Prefer the local newsletter only? Send \$20 and this form to: Bridgerland Audubon Society, PO Box 3501, Logan, UT 84323-3501 for a subscription to *The Stilt*.

National Audubon occasionally makes its membership list available to selected organizations. To have your name omitted from this, please check this box.



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