

TO TRY SOMETHING NEW--AND OLD

by Leif J. Robinson, Wellesley

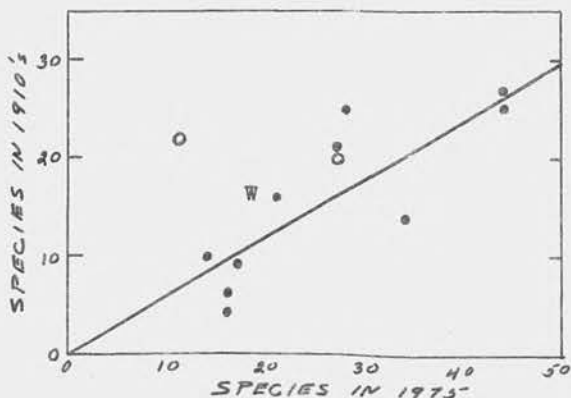
The October, 1975, issue of American Birds carried this announcement: "Wanted--Antique Christmas Counts." It asked that birders duplicate as nearly as possible Christmas Bird Counts (CBC's) taken six or seven decades earlier--date, route, and hours afield. Of course, the use of modern binoculars was prohibited, as were telescopes, field guides, tape recorders, and even "pishing".

The results were published in the April, 1976, issue of that journal. A dozen counts were taken, all in the Northeast where the CBC first gained a foothold. In the accompanying graph I have plotted the number of species recorded on the original CBC and the number found in 1975. The two open circles indicate a 1975 count that was too brief to be compatible with its 1915 counterpart, and a 1975 count that repeated one made as recently as 1934, hence not equivalent in time span.

The line was eye-fitted to the dots, for there seemed to be a trend. Surprisingly, observers in 1975 recorded roughly 1.7 times as many species within the same CBC areas as their predecessors did. Why?

Are more species present today, possibly because the habitat is more diverse? Perhaps, but I doubt by a factor of 1.7, which, on the average, adds 11 species to every count. Or are birders more knowledgeable today? Possibly, though the vast bulk of the sightings at both epochs is of very common species. Perhaps some senior readers would like to comment on this apparent enigma.

I wish there were more data--10 valid counts are too few on which to draw conclusions. If American Birds tries this experiment again, I hope birders in the Greater Boston area will take a large part, for here we have seen a child grow into adulthood.



The count marked with a "W" was taken by the author in Weston, following a 1915 CBC by Warren F. Eaton and Charles Brewer, Jr. The probable route of the original CBC was reconstructed by Charlotte E. Smith, who possesses Eaton's diaries.