

THE FIRST GREATER BOSTON BREEDING BIRD CENSUS

by Robert H. Stymeist, Waltham

On Saturday, June 18, 1977, the first Greater Boston Breeding Bird Census took place. The area covered was the same as during the Greater Boston Christmas Count, as were most of the participants who covered their wintertime areas. The idea of a "Christmas" count during the breeding season is not new; the Captree (Long Island, N.Y.) Christmas Bird Count initiated such a census in June, 1972.

We followed the rules and format of the official Christmas Bird Count and did not make any special effort to locate nests. However, if any unexpected species was observed, it was noted so that a follow-up could be made. What did we learn from this experience? What can be done in subsequent years to improve our results? Will this effort encourage more people to survey existing Christmas Bird Count circles during the breeding season?

The result of the count was 112 species, representing 15,729 individuals. This was quite unexpected; I anticipated 85-90 species at most. (The 1976 Greater Boston Christmas Bird Count recorded 110 species and 119,504 individuals.) The surprises were mostly lingerers or non-breeding species, that is, Brant, American Wigeon, Greater Scaup, Bufflehead, White-winged Scoter, and Yellow-bellied Flycatcher. Interesting species which deserve more attention include Ruffed Grouse, Bobwhite, Sora, Mourning Warbler and Dark-eyed Junco. Other surprising sightings were of four Black Terns, an adult Little Blue Heron, and a Magnolia Warbler.

THE BEGINNINGS

The first problem was to motivate a good number of birders to participate in the traditionally dull month of June. I tried to muster support from the regulars of the December Count, but could come up with only 13 out of the 55 who participated in December, 1976. Thirteen "new" volunteers brought the total field coverage to 26. I tried to make the task appealing for the observer by emphasizing the counting of species as the goal - a roundup similar to that of the South Shore Bird Club.

Secondly, an effort was made by all observers to note any breeding behavior, such as a nest, nest building, young, parents carrying food or feeding young. The counting of individuals was the third priority, with no one visiting the Starling roost or logging gulls at any of the dumps.

Everyone was out to get a big list, and each area competed with the others. The Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas project, sponsored by the Massachusetts Audubon Society and the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Game, had already helped some of the participants to

locate nests within their assigned areas. However, we also confirmed many new birds within several of the atlas blocks. Uncommon or declining nesters and those species which are at or near the edge of their ranges were especially searched for. This kept the excitement level high. Nobody spent a day looking for an Ovenbird's nest, and only one party tried to locate owls.

THE AREAS COVERED

There were ten sections within the count circle, each with a captain. Area 1 (South Boston-Squantum) was headed by Dave Brown and Josh Murphy. This area, which includes Spectacle Island in Boston Harbor where several herons breed (not covered on this date, however), provided the largest number of unexpected species. The big surprise was four Black Terns near Squaw Rock. Dave and Josh also found the only Common Loon, Brant, Little Blue Heron, Glossy Ibis, Blue-winged Teal, Greater Yellowlegs, and Carolina Wren.

Area 2 (Revere-Saugus) had Soheil Zende and Craig Jackson in command. They did the only owling, which yielded none. Their highlights included a Sora Rail at Breakheart (this most interesting find will hopefully be followed up), a late Mourning Warbler, and the only White-winged Scoter.

Area 3 (Cambridge) was covered for seven hours by Tom Marvin, assisted by the Stymeist party at the Arthur D. Little marsh. A Willow Flycatcher's nest was found, along with that of a Cedar Waxwing. Along Alewife Brook, 23 Black-crowned Night Herons were located.

Area 4 (Brookline) yielded to Andy Agush and Bill Evans the remarkable American Wigeon at Brookline Reservoir. Andy also found one female Bobolink at Alldendale Farm and the only White-throated Sparrows of the count.

Area 5 (Belmont) was covered by the author and party, which flushed an unexpected Wood Duck at Beaver Brook. (A Rose-breasted Grosbeak's nest was found with four young; only a few feet above the grosbeak was the nest of a Northern Oriole.)

Area 6 (Lexington-Woburn) was surveyed by Dick Veit and Marcia Littlefield. The highlights were three Orchard Orioles, a nesting Eastern Bluebird and a lone Red-breasted Nuthatch.

Area 7 (Waltham) was handled by the Stymeist party also. The most interesting find was a Red-shouldered Hawk's nest and a Red Fox.

Area 8 (Middlesex Fells). Paul and Julie Roberts had been covering the Fells for the Atlas project, so they knew exactly where everything was for the count day. The Blue-gray Gnatcatchers were expected - but not five nests of them! Other good birds were nesting Dark-eyed Junco, the only Ruffed Grouse and Black-throated Green Warbler (!), two Pine Warblers, three Red-breasted Nuthatches, and the Yellow-bellied Flycatcher.

Area 9 (Melrose). John Andrews took command here and, like Paul, had been working the area for the Atlas project. He also found the most interesting bird of the count - the Magnolia Warbler. There is no explanation as to why it was still in Melrose.

Area 10 (Forest Hills-Newton) saw Herman D'Entremont and party at the Arboretum, where they found Fish Crows, four Gray Catbird nests and three young Mockingbirds. Mimi Murphy and Ruth Rabinow covered most of Newton, locating a Bobwhite. Sherm and Sue Dennison criss-crossed Hammond Pond Woods and also recorded two Willow Flycatchers.

PROBLEMS

In December the day is short and the afternoon is not significantly less productive than the morning or evening. In June, however, the day is very long and tiring, and the afternoon can be almost nonproductive. For future breeding bird counts, I would recommend more observers working only a half-day, from before sunrise until afternoon when all the participants would meet for lunch and compile the list. If something was "missed," someone could be dispatched during the late afternoon or evening. A long half-day will not be too exhausting, though it would still span six to eight hours. I, for one, could hardly move at 4:00 p.m., with the temperature at 88°F. In conclusion, it is best to have as many good observers as possible active afield during the most productive early morning hours.

THE RESULTS

Greater Boston, Mass., 42°24'N 71°06'W, all points within fifteen-mile diameter, center Healy School, Somerville. June 18, 1977, 4:30 a.m. - 6:00 p.m. Clear-partly cloudy; temperature 75°-88°. Wind calm.

Common Loon, 1; Double-crested Cormorant, 138; Great Blue Heron, 3; Green Heron, 11; Little Blue Heron, 1; Snowy Egret, 33; Black-crowned Night Heron, 57; Glossy Ibis, 1; Canada Goose, 113; Brant, 1; Mallard, 296; Black Duck, 71; American Wigeon, 1; Wood Duck, 2; Greater Scaup, 3; Bufflehead, 3; Common Eider, 12; White-winged Scoter, 2; Red-tailed Hawk 2; Red-shouldered Hawk, 1; Broad-winged Hawk, 4; American Kestrel, 15; Ruffed Grouse, 1; Bobwhite, 2; Ring-necked Pheasant, 62; Virginia Rail, 3; Sora Rail, 1; Killdeer, 29; Black-bellied Plover, 11; American Woodcock, 1; Spotted Sandpiper, 6; Greater Yellowlegs, 1; Great Black-backed Gull, 56; Herring Gull, 1439; Ring-billed Gull, 16; Laughing Gull, 4; Bonaparte's Gull, 42; Common Tern, 167; Least Tern, 4; Black Tern, 4; Rock Dove, 288; Mourning Dove, 91; Common Nighthawk, 7; Chimney Swift, 100; Belted Kingfisher, 2; Common Flicker, 67; Hairy Woodpecker, 7; Downy Woodpecker, 45; Eastern Kingbird, 62; Great-crested Flycatcher, 33; Eastern Phoebe, 13; Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, 1; Willow Flycatcher, 4; Eastern Wood Pewee, 7; Tree Swallow, 30; Rough-winged Swallow, 7; Barn Swallow, 45; Blue Jay, 178; Common Crow, 270; Fish Crow, 3; Black-capped Chickadee, 209; Tufted Titmouse, 67; White-breasted Nuthatch, 31; Red-breasted Nuthatch, 4; Brown Creeper, 14; House Wren, 46; Carolina Wren, 1; Mockingbird, 72; Gray Catbird, 285;

Brown Thrasher, 60; American Robin, 356; Wood Thrush, 22; Veery, 4; Eastern Bluebird, 1; Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, 5; Cedar Waxwing, 15; Starling, 7,642; Red-eyed Vireo, 49; Warbling Vireo, 19; Yellow Warbler, 96; Magnolia Warbler, 1; Black-throated Green Warbler, 1; Pine Warbler, 2; Prairie Warbler, 5; Ovenbird, 4; Mourning Warbler, 1; Common Yellowthroat, 108; American Redstart, 10; House Sparrow, 378; Bobolink, 2; Eastern Meadowlark, 7; Redwinged Blackbird, 773; Orchard Oriole, 3; Northern Oriole, 126; Common Grackle, 581; Brown-headed Cowbird, 60; Scarlet Tanager, 12; Cardinal, 62; Rose-breasted Grosbeak, 23; Indigo Bunting, 51; Purple Finch, 5; House Finch, 96; American Goldfinch, 89; Rufous-sided Towhee, 43; Savannah Sparrow, 5; Sharp-tailed Sparrow, 14; Dark-eyed Junco, 3; Chipping Sparrow, 40; Field Sparrow, 13; White-throated Sparrow, 2; Swamp Sparrow, 15; Song Sparrow, 317.

Twenty-four observers in ten parties. No party hours given. No mileage recorded. Andrew Agush, John Andrews, Fred Bouchard, David Brown, Sherm and Sue Dennison, Herman D'Entremont, Bill S. Evans, Rose Gould, Mary Hutchinson, Craig Jackson, Marcia Litchfield, Tom Marvin, Joshua Murphy, Mimi Murphy, Ruth Rabinow, Martha Reinstein, Alice Rios, Raymond Rios, Julie and Paul Roberts, Robert Stymeist (compiler), Mr. & Mrs. Ugaya, Richard Veit and Soheil Zende.

CHRISTMAS GIVING - SHOULD SOMETIMES BE TO ONESELF

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