

The Importance of Counting Birds' Numbers

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The majority - the vast majority - of birders today make no effort to estimate numbers of individuals of each species seen or heard at the end of a field trip. As the days, weeks, months and years pass the observer's field trips tend to blend one into another and it is difficult if not impossible to recollect just which species are increasing in numbers and which decreasing.

If the rise or fall in numbers is dramatic - such as the population explosion in House Finches or the crash of Eastern Bluebirds and Least Flycatchers, it is obvious. But what about American Redstarts? Eastern Kingbirds? Swainson's Thrushes? Depending upon the birder's observations in the most recent migration he or she might venture an opinion. But compared to 5 years ago? 10? 20? A blank stare would be the usual response.

I have kept records of my field trips going back to the late 1930's - how would 50 Bluebirds on a Sudbury Valley trip in early April 1938 seem to you? It is my firm opinion that numbers of many of our most attractive migrants are way down in numbers over the past few years. Included in that list would be Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (for two springs I have seen none), Great Crested Flycatcher, Cliff Swallow, Brown Creeper, House Wren, Brown Thrasher, almost all the thrushes, Golden-crowned Kinglet, most of the wood warblers (but particularly Golden-winged), Rusty Blackbird and Purple Finch.

Why are so many bird species so much scarcer now than before? Many reasons have been given: pesticide spraying on nesting grounds - such as the blackbird kill by the Army in the South or the heavy frosts in Florida that have had a deleterious effect. My gut hunch is that loss of habitat in Central and South America is the principal culprit. This is where many birds winter.

I know Osborne Earle kept careful records of his Mt. Auburn Cemetery bird trips and Bob Stymeist does the same now - yet all too common is Ruth Emery's report to me of a trip in Mt. Auburn in which the leader just checked off the species observed.

Mt. Auburn is practically unchanged in habitat from ten or twenty years ago, true the shrubs around Willow Pond are scarce, the bank of Forsythia near Willow Pond is gone, and there are other minor losses, but basically it is the same. Yet Mt. Auburn is not as good as it used to be. How many people remember the days in May when there was song everywhere - from the moment you pulled in the gates? When all sections had good numbers of migrants? Now it is a matter of driving around in the Cemetery until you find the one or two places where the migrants are numerous; a week ago Spectacle Pond - yesterday the Dry Dell - today the Willow Pond area. As a birder whose ears are very good but whose eyes are poor I mourn the loss of song and the days when migrants "dripped off the trees".

So after your next field trip - and in all field trips in the future - try and keep accurate counts. They are needed!