Editors' Notebook

I will wager that virtually everyone reading this has participated in a Christmas Bird Count. But most of us, whether participating for the conviviality of the event or out of devotion to careful survey of birds on our patch (or for both reasons), don't spend much time thinking about the trends in bird distributions or populations that lie hidden in the millions of entries in the C.B.C. database.

I have to admit that I was not long ago a skeptic about the scientific use of data gathered on these counts. Too many variables came to mind that seemed to overwhelm comparability of counts from year to year: observers' varying skill levels and local knowledge; observer bias (spending half the day looking for a rare gull on the coast rather than dutifully counting House Finches at feeders in the suburbs); the variable timing of counts; and the capricious Weather. In the mid-1980s, when several young turks inherited a plum territory on a C.B.C. from a veteran of six decades of Christmas bird counting, they asked how he counted all the many thousands of gulls and vultures at the landfill. "Those aren't really birds," came the reply. "I count the cowbirds and leave." I try to refrain from odd anecdotes, but this observer was quite serious in his bias against the big offal-eating species; there was something unseemly about them that made them unfit for the holiday tally. (The C.B.C. data for that count subsequently reflected an instant influx of about 10,000 Herring gulls!) As a participant in many counts in the mid-Atlantic, I can recall many similar idiosyncrasies or inconsistencies among counts.

But perhaps these differences are insignificant when we look at the C.B.C. data across large areas and across the years. Indeed, it was heartening to read Bruce Peterjohn's "Reflections on the historic, current, and future analyses of Christmas Bird Count data" in the annual journal still known as *American Birds* (100th count issue) and imagine the as-yet unwritten analyses of those data. There are naturally plenty of species for which trend analysis would suffer little from the variables that had preoccupied me. Two such species—the Hooded Merganser and the non-native Budgerigar, both striking species and hardly birds to be overlooked by birders—are considered in this issue. The papers by Bill Pranty and Stephen Davis both base their analyses largely on C.B.C. data, from Florida and New England, respectively. An observer living and birding on either end of the East Coast might glance at these papers and note: "Well, of course Budgies are declining in Florida." Or: "Of course Hoodies are increasing in Connecticut. I see evidence of that every time I go out birding."

But it takes more than a confidence in one's own casual local observations to make statements of this sort that will satisfy the community of scientists. Though no one would disagree with the conclusions of these papers—that Budgerigar populations in Florida have decreased dramatically in recent years, that Hooded Mergansers' numbers show an upward trend in New England—the demonstration of these contentions involves analysis beyond the obvious, and beyond the C.B.C. numbers themselves.

And just *where* would one look for information about Budgerigar populations in North America? Though in their checklists both A. O. U. and A. B. A. list Budgerigar as a firmly established, "naturalized" bird in Florida, no paper on the species has been published since its precipitous decline there, and no monograph on the species is slated for inclusion in the *Birds of North America* series, which does treat several other non-native birds. Pranty presents a thorough overview of the current Florida situation, along with many useful historical data.

While the Budgerigar's population has been relatively isolated in Florida (and so its increase and decline can be starkly graphed), Hooded Mergansers are more widespread; their apparent increase in New England might not reflect an increase in population at all but perhaps only a shift in wintering patterns. Davis's paper does not seek to make far-reaching claims based on the data. Rather, he is satisfied to investigate the data in terms of several sets of variables among counts (latitude, longitude, temperature, and presence or absence of coastline) that might show statistical correlation with Hooded Mergansers' numbers in New England. His tests show an association of increasing numbers of mergansers with latitude and, to a lesser degree, with salt water but perhaps surprisingly, *not* with temperature.

Some readers will see the statistical analyses and turn the page (that "C-" in the statistics course still has some sting!). But we should all take a careful look at both articles, as they give us a sense of what can be done with C.B.C. data in our own areas—and convey how much work must be done to demonstrate even the most modest of scientific claims. Pranty, for instance, takes great care to "vet" the very C.B.C. data, which are never entirely free of human error. Though these articles have regional focus, both have broad implications for all regions.

Ever elusive in studies such as these that harness C.B.C. records is the cause or causes for apparent increases or declines. Both authors speculate on reasons for their subjects' change in status, but in both cases, there may be no certainty as to cause or causes. Pranty's analysis would appear to rule out harsh weather or disease as primary causes for decline; the possibility that House Sparrows and European Starlings outcompeted Budgerigars for nest cavities seems a good one (we're pretty sure that Hooded Mergansers didn't evict the Budgies, yes). Davis correctly indicates that study on a larger scale will be needed to identify causes for possible population changes in the merganser.

Along the lines of C.B.C. data, Mitra and Raithel have ventured beyond the December and early January period set for the holiday counts and conducted similar surveys on Block Island, Rhode Island, in November, December, and February, with the help of local students. Their findings, which may surprise even longtime observers, suggest that the reduction of half-hardy species from mid- to late winter is less likely to be a result of mortality (as commonly assumed) than of a continued post-migratory dispersal, or facultative migration. Another popular assumption—that the timing of C.B.C.s leads those surveys to include lingering southbound migrants, rather than wintering birds, in northeastern North America—also comes into question. The paper's findings support, as the authors write, "the existence of a natural distinction between late migrants and half-hardy wintering species in northeastern North America," a murky topic that has received little scrutiny in scientific papers but that is often taken for granted by birders in the field. We think of Northern Cardinal, for instance, as a largely sedentary species in winter, but the view from Block Island (which, like many offshore islands, has a clear advantage in documenting influxes) suggests that cardinals are prone to facultative migration in some numbers after an earlier late-autumn push. As someone who lives at the tip of the long Delmarva Peninsula, I'll be watching cardinals more carefully now.

Debts of thanks

At the end of the Volume, the A.B.A. would like to express its deepest appreciation to the people who have spent many hours reviewing manuscripts over the past year. Our thanks to J. Van Remsen, P. A. Buckley, Guy McCaskie, Michael A. Patten, Kimball Garrett, Douglas B. McNair, Jon L. Dunn, Erik Hirschfeld, Stephen J. Dinsmore, Alvaro Jaramillo, W. Ross Silcock, and Marshall J. Iliff for their hard work on seven manuscripts this year. This issue was co-edited in part with the previous Editor, Michael A. Patten, and with Associate Editor Paul E. Lehman, both of whom have our especial thanks.

—Edward S. (Ned) Brinkley, Editor