

# Return of the Mad Counter: **Mission**

**By Kelly J. McKay**

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Last season, you may recall, I fell just shy of completing a personal goal: participating in one count each day throughout the 23-day period of the 103rd Christmas Bird Count season. In hopes of full success for the 104th count, I started planning and contacting count compilers throughout a six-state region of the Midwest by early November. I scheduled the seven counts I compile on open dates when I could find no other Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs) in which to participate. After numerous hours of telephone and e-mail conversations, not to mention some schedule shifting, the task of setting up the marathon was complete. All I had to do was actually participate in 23 consecutive CBCs to realize my objective. Easy, right?

After having done 20 counts last year, it seemed that 23 counts would not be overly difficult to accomplish. Sleep deprivation could become a factor in my observation skills. Not wanting to negatively impact the counts, I asked all my field parties to let me know if I seemed to be making mistakes or missing birds. If so, I would start sleeping more to avoid risking the integrity of the counts (or my own safety). After weeks of preparation the eve of the CBC count period arrived. The first day of the count, 14 December, would be easy enough; it was one of my counts, the Davenport, Iowa, count, and little travel was required, since my home is within the territory.

But my attempt at completing a full marathon was in serious jeopardy only three days into the count period, when my scheduled count in Bridgeport, Wisconsin, was postponed because of a winter storm. I frantically jumped on the Internet and searched throughout the Midwest region for a replacement count, and finally found one in Jamaica—in central Iowa, that is. Though the count was nearly four-and-a-half hours away and required a 450-mile round trip, and though I encountered the winter storm that postponed my original count, the day went well and got me back on track toward my goal.

As the days passed, I was not able to schedule any sleep. By 21 December, in Lake Red Rock, Iowa, I was beginning to wonder if I would be able to successfully accomplish this challenge. But outstanding counts on the next few days bolstered my spirits.

Christmas morning found me on the Chicago Lakefront, Illinois, count. The near total lack of natural habitat within the circle greatly reduces the species recorded on this inner city CBC. We recorded only 27 species, the lowest number for the quest. Keeping awake was getting tougher and taxing my system to the point that I became ill two days later, threatening my attempt at completing the marathon. Worn down but

## Marathon Facts

Miles Traveled . . . . .	7100.25
Species Identified . . . . .	132
Birds Counted . . . . .	241,223
Hours Driving . . . . .	92.75
Hours Counting Birds . . . . .	267.25
Hours Slept . . . . .	32
Soda Consumed (gallons) . . . . .	16.4

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# Accomplished

undaunted, I continued, coughing and wheezing my way through the next few counts in Illinois. On 29 December, with sickness overtaking me and at the urging of several friends, I decided to end my sleepless streak after 398 consecutive hours. At this point, my marathon attempt was two-thirds complete. I slept for the first time in 16 days.

After seven wonderful hours of rest, on 31 December I experienced my best count ever, in terms of diversity. My group on the Mermet Lake, Illinois, count had an extraordinary day, recording 90 species!

On 1 January in Jackson County, Illinois, I entered the homestretch. For the first time in nearly a week, I was feeling pretty good. Just five days to go.

Finally, the last day of my epic journey arrived—5 January. I closed as I opened, with one of my own counts, Andalusia, Illinois. Bird activity was high and my group had a great day to finish this 23-day endeavor—56 species. As I was driving home at day's end I began thinking about next year and how I could top this season's effort.

In the end, all tallies from last year's attempt were surpassed. During the course of completing this full CBC marathon, my field parties identified a total of 132 species (115 last year) and recorded 241,223 individual birds (101,066). Of these, only six species were observed on all 23 counts (Rock Pigeon, Downy Woodpecker, American Crow, European Starling, American Tree Sparrow, and House Sparrow). I traveled 7100.25 miles (6322) over 360 hours (322), this included travel time, as well as daily compilation time. Consequently, my total effort per count averaged 309 miles and 15.7 hours. By comparison, I spent 92.75 hours traveling to and from counts (85.5), 267.25 hours actually counting birds (236.5), and only 32 hours sleeping (107.25). I went without sleep for 398 consecutive hours during the first 16 counts.

With the accomplishment of this CBC marathon, I am now soliciting ideas from other birders and Christmas counters on a new CBC challenge to undertake. If anyone has a suggestion, please drop me an e-mail. *Until next year...good birding to all!*

## CBC results from my field parties.

Count	Date	# Species	# Individuals
Davenport	12-14-03	64	13,274
Lost Nation	12-15-03	50	1645
Jamaica	12-16-03	49	18,097
Green Island	12-17-03	59	3088
Clinton	12-18-03	58	8843
Western Mercer County	12-19-03	47	2382
Cedar Rapids	12-20-03	59	2505
Lake Red Rock	12-21-03	48	26,287
Keokuk	12-22-03	62	17,460
Princeton-Camanche	12-23-03	60	5417
Van Petten	12-24-03	52	3975
Chicago Lakefront	12-25-03	27	4047
Montello	12-26-03	45	1918
Lake Chautauqua NWR	12-27-03	65	3164
Illini State Park	12-28-03	57	6938
Horseshoe Lake	12-29-03	71	6785
Union County	12-30-03	74	24,940
Mermet Lake	12-31-03	90	32,068
Jackson County	01-01-04	69	51,621
Adams County	01-02-04	30	501
North Linn	01-03-04	38	2104
Muscatine	01-04-04	52	1869
Andalusia	01-05-04	56	2295
<b>Totals: 23 CBCs</b>		<b>132</b>	<b>241,223</b>