

Out of the Fog



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■ A History and Analysis of the Point Reyes Peninsula Christmas Bird Count ■

An hour north of San Francisco a triangular-shaped peninsula juts out from the main coastline and ends at a dramatic coastal headland. The Point Reyes Peninsula Christmas Bird Count (PRPCBC) occupies most of the central part of this landform. In terms of total species observed, number of rarities, and number of committed participants, the count ranks near the top of all North American CBCs.

As co-compilers of the PRPCBC, Susan Colletta and I consider this huge endeavor to be both a privilege and a responsibility we take very seriously. We have had the honor and unique perspective to compile this noteworthy count for over half the years of its existence. For three months out of the year, we have volunteered our dedicated and meticulous efforts—Susan for 9 years and I for 20.

Now that our tenure as compilers is ending, this is an especially good opportunity to share some of the stories of the count and reflect on trends of some of the species that have been recorded.

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Count Circle

Before the huge popularity of birding and the dramatic increase in Christmas Bird Counts, there were two counts in the western part of Marin County. The Tomales Bay CBC, initiated in 1957, was centered on that narrow, 12-mile long estuary. Immediately to the south of that count circle was another, the Drakes Bay CBC. In the 1950s less than a handful of birders lived in the area. The night before the count, some of the Bay Area's most active birders would camp out in Grace Miller's house. Jon Winter and Rich Stallcup, the primary researchers from the Point Reyes Bird



Grasslands and Drakes Estero—home to many raptors. Photo/David Wimpfheimer

Observatory (PRBO), realized that while both of these counts had wetlands and a variety of other habitats, combining the two would maximize the diversity in the 15-mile-diameter count circle. After much analysis, the Point Reyes Peninsula count circle was centered a few miles west of the town of Inverness and started in 1970.

About 50 percent of the count circle includes areas protected as part of the Point Reyes National Seashore. Lands to the north of Tomales Bay are mostly private ranchland. A unique zoning restriction in this area limits the number of houses, helping to maintain the rural character of the area. Dairy and beef ranches are the dominant agricultural use of a major portion of the count circle. The ranching community has been very generous over the years, allowing counters to access large areas of private property.

Tomales Bay, Limantour, and Drakes Estero, extremely productive estuaries, are within the count circle. Many riparian zones such as Olema Marsh are

within the boundary as well as Inverness Ridge, a forest dominated by Douglas fir, Bishop pine, California bay and coast live oak. Grasslands occupy more than 40 percent of the circle. In residential and ranching areas, nonnative Eucalyptus trees form a habitat that can harbor lingering warblers and other insectivores. Rocky beaches, extensive salt marsh, sandy beach, coastal scrub, coastal prairie, and the towns of Inverness, Marshall, Olema, and Point Reyes Station are within the count boundaries. The total population of the area, about 2000, is growing very slowly.

Since a great majority of the land within the count circle is protected from development in the National Seashore or private ranchland, the Point Reyes Peninsula count is in an enviable situation. There are wetland restoration projects and some subtle changes, but habitat destruction can be eliminated as a factor in the variability of species totals. One of the main reasons for conducting CBCs is to monitor wintering populations of birds. The Point Reyes count circle is within a two-hour drive of six million people; however, the protected status of the lands here really does allow the count to be a litmus test for bird species and the environmental health of the area.

Organization

Organizing the count is like a military operation. Ideally, there are no weak areas and all the parts must be working efficiently. The circle is divided into 31 areas, each one having a leader who typically has been counting that section for many years. They are experienced at using their team of counters in the most efficient method to cover their assigned territory. Sometimes a new leader, like Josiah Clark last year, may bring a new approach to covering an area. His energetic team recorded 118 species in their area alone using bicycles and kayaks, in addition to the more typical modes of travel.

The number of counters in an area ranges from 4 to 12, determined roughly by species richness. Compilers some-

times need to inform an eager counter that they cannot count in the area of their choosing because that area already has sufficient coverage. Counters may have to count in an area that was not their first choice to ensure that the entire circle is covered properly. Participants in boats count two of the areas, Tomales Bay and the ocean. The latter area forms about 15 percent of the count circle.

I have always attempted to learn the presence of any uncommon birds in the area and to direct that information to leaders. Finding those birds and contributing to a higher species total is a great accomplishment. Nevertheless, we put a greater effort into counting all species to maintain the validity of our growing database.

Effort

The PRPCBC ranks near the top in number of field participants. In several of the last few years we have had well over 200 participants. Co-compiler Susan Colletta and I are especially proud of this achievement. Several of the other CBCs that regularly have such a large number of participants are urban counts that may require only a short drive for participants. Many of the participants in the PRPCBC have to drive several hours to reach their assigned areas.

Analysis

The use of CBC data to document changing bird populations has been examined in the past (Butcher 1990). Uncertainties of weather, number of participants, skill level, consistency of effort, and other factors can make the use of CBC data unreliable to make accurate judgments of population trends. CBC analysis for wide areas, such as a state or region, will be more accurate than a single count to make any analysis of population trends.

Table 1 shows average totals in five-year spans for selected species observed on the PRPCBC. I am aware that this is a simplistic monitoring tool; the selection of specific years is arbitrary. Furthermore, inclement weather in one year can greatly



Rufous-crowned Sparrow (*Aimophila ruficeps*), uncommon but regular at Point Reyes. Photo/Bob Power

alter average numbers in such a small period. Ten-year average totals would not be affected greatly by the occurrence of one bad weather count. However, I feel that the shorter time spans illustrate trends in our totals in more detail.

Most of the species shown in Table 1 were selected because their population

trends over a wider geographic area have already been established. They have been documented in many other places (Sauer et al. 1996). I have also included several other species of more local interest. Some of the factors in their trends are not so clear, but I hope that their inclusion will stimulate further study.

Five-year averages are also shown for the number of participants, participant hours, and number of species in Table 1. The table also shows record highs and lows for the 38-year period of the count and perceived trends.

The number of participants has increased significantly recently. A greater number of participants may lead directly to a larger number of birds counted,



Black-crowned Night-Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) are easier to count when they're active. Photo/David Wimpfheimer

although that is not always true. A larger number of counters means terrestrial areas can be counted more efficiently. If counters can walk down a trail that was not covered previously, a higher total of sparrows, kinglets, and other land birds may be a direct result. However, ducks, herons, shorebirds and other waterbirds

Table 1. Average totals in five-year spans for selected species observed in the PRPCBC.

| | 1970-74 | 1975-79 | 1980-84 | 1985-89 | 1990-94 | 1995-99 | 2000-04 | 2005-07 | Trend | 1970-2007 Low and High |
|--------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------------------------|
| Brant | 239 | 332 | 160 | 59 | 1115 | 1651 | 1635 | 1859 | up | 8-2550 |
| Wood Duck | 2.6 | 5.6 | 4.4 | 34 | 25 | 39 | 87 | 58 | up | 3-126 |
| Eurasian Wigeon | 0.4 | 3.6 | 1.2 | 2.8 | 4.4 | 4 | 4 | 13 | up | 1-18 |
| Mallard | 254 | 235 | 389 | 486 | 702 | 826 | 954 | 1518 | up | 108-1681 |
| Redhead | 200 | 337 | 185 | 8 | 12 | 6 | 13 | 2 | down | 1-784 |
| Greater Scaup | 828 | 1438 | 742 | 2391 | 1783 | 2295 | 6178 | 5440 | up | 126-8176 |
| White-winged Scoter | 457 | 278 | 342 | 658 | 445 | 73 | 46 | 38 | down | 2-1728 |
| Bufflehead | 4246 | 6732 | 4638 | 4613 | 7142 | 6954 | 7198 | 11869 | up | 1131-13499 |
| Ruddy Duck | 4760 | 6185 | 6902 | 4728 | 3690 | 3443 | 2730 | 2176 | down | 795-9914 |
| Red-necked Grebe | 24 | 29 | 21 | 28 | 34 | 57 | 39 | 64 | up | 2-130 |
| Eared Grebe | 223 | 253 | 277 | 233 | 386 | 554 | 869 | 769 | up | 43-1329 |
| Brown Pelican | 128 | 163 | 122 | 25.4 | 108 | 610 | 288 | 852 | up | 3-1598 |
| Double-crested Cormorant | 450 | 864 | 710.8 | 544 | 964 | 930 | 1970 | 2331 | up | 123-3373 |
| Osprey | 3.4 | 5 | 6.6 | 7.6 | 15 | 17.8 | 21.2 | 23 | up | 1-33 |
| Northern Harrier | 56 | 52 | 57 | 48 | 76 | 87 | 94 | 107 | up | 1-150 |
| Red-shouldered Hawk | 14.2 | 18.4 | 21.6 | 30 | 29 | 30 | 38 | 47 | up | 7-64 |
| American Kestrel | 241 | 277 | 191 | 174 | 166 | 148 | 176 | 169 | down | 66-307 |
| Peregrine Falcon | 2.4 | 3.9 | 3.6 | 6.2 | 10 | 15 | 15.6 | 18.7 | up | 1-22 |
| Long-billed Curlew | 5.8 | 6.8 | 2.2 | 7.2 | 8.8 | 23.6 | 21 | 55.7 | up | 1-83 |
| Marbled Godwit | 694 | 1434 | 684 | 1019 | 1254 | 1038 | 1838 | 1813 | up | 277-2402 |
| Nuttall's Woodpecker | 6 | 9.6 | 14.6 | 26 | 26 | 29 | 41 | 49 | up | 2-52 |
| Loggerhead Shrike | 42 | 51 | 13 | 12 | 8 | 5.4 | 3.8 | 1.3 | down | 1-95 |
| American Crow | 909 | 1121 | 936 | 967 | 1201 | 990 | 1590 | 1409 | up | 577-1879 |
| Common Raven | 340 | 351 | 265 | 387 | 406 | 440 | 509 | 622 | up | 121-680 |
| Ruby-crowned Kinglet | 1176 | 1534 | 1028 | 1138 | 1062 | 1025 | 1231 | 1846 | up | 380-2614 |
| Wrentit | 615 | 799 | 456 | 487 | 427 | 362 | 484 | 407 | down | 140-1090 |
| Townsend's Warbler | 72.0 | 138.0 | 158.0 | 206.0 | 191.0 | 282.0 | 272.0 | 412.0 | up | 32-866 |
| Common Yellowthroat | 28 | 30 | 23 | 52 | 32 | 39 | 44 | 48 | unknown | 2-74 |
| White-throated Sparrow | 1 | 3.2 | 3.6 | 10 | 16.2 | 16.8 | 11.4 | 20 | up | 1-30 |
| White-crowned Sparrow | 3826 | 3291 | 2272 | 2724 | 2703 | 2723 | 2623 | 2763 | down | 1156-6204 |
| Species | 192 | 198 | 187 | 195 | 197 | 196 | 197 | 196 | | 177-205 |
| Observers in the Field | 168 | 181 | 146 | 135 | 139 | 131 | 173 | 205 | | 107-230 |
| Total Party Hours | 385 | 495 | 316 | 328 | 328 | 316 | 442 | 480 | | 281-579 |



Point Reyes has more Bufflehead (*Bucephala albeola*) than any other CBC in North America.

Photo/David Wimpfheimer

by their nature are restricted to aquatic habitats. Increasing the number of counters by 10 to 20 percent should not change those species totals much since the size of these areas remains a constant.

Average species totals were divided by party hours, which resulted in a value of birds per party hour (bpph). These values were compared with average totals. For almost every species in Table 1, the bpph values followed the same trends as the average species totals.

Species Totals

When the CBC was established in its present location, Jon Winter (of PRBO) predicted that counters would find 200 species. That benchmark was achieved in the count's second year and several times since. Recording such a high species total often ranks the PRPCBC with those along the Gulf of Mexico and Southern California in the top 10 counts based on total number of species. Given the count's location in Northern California, reaching that total is especially noteworthy. The weather in the area can be cold and often rainy and windy. The 2002 count (103rd CBC) was particularly extreme, with typhoon-generated winds and copious amounts of rain. Records show that fewer neotropical migrants spend the winter in the area compared to warmer areas just a few hours to the south.

Defined simply by species total, the Point Reyes CBC is a model of consistency. The species total has been between 190 and 200 species in most years. Inclement weather was a direct factor in three of the five years that the species total was below 190.

Such a high species total can be attributed to several factors: the location of the count immediately along the Pacific coast, extremely varied and protected habitats, the presence of several rich estuaries, and, most important of all, the participation of many skilled and dedicated observers. The last point is key; a large number of naturalists, biologists, and others who are very knowledgeable about the avian world live in the area or visit it regularly.

By their nature CBCs are all about numbers. Some numbers have greater value placed on them than others. A species count of 200 is clearly noteworthy; however, if two uncommon birds were not found, 198 would still be a very impressive total. In order to get 200 or more species we need good weather on the count day. Additionally, a good mix of pelagic birds, waterfowl, nocturnal species, and uncommon passerines are all necessary. Such conditions occurred in 2001 when our record of 205 species was tallied.

Species Analysis

Thousands of hours have been devoted to finding and counting birds in the count circle, but, surprisingly, there has been little analysis of what all the numbers mean.

It bears repeating that preserved habitats, and a relatively constant effort level, allow us to speculate on other factors that may contribute to changing species totals. Some birds are permanent residents and their trends may reflect local conditions, while migratory species may be affected by complex changes great distances away.

Increasing Species

■ Waterbirds

Most of the waterbird species listed in Table 1 show upward population trends. Surveys by Cypress Grove Preserve biologists (Kelly and Tappen 1998) have previously documented increasing numbers of Brant, scaup, and Bufflehead on Tomales Bay. These researchers were instrumental in the census, recording 13,499 Bufflehead in 2006, the highest total in North American CBC history.



Numbers of Red-shouldered Hawks (*Buteo lineatus*) have increased significantly at Point Reyes since 1970.
Photo/David Wimpfheimer

Aerial waterfowl surveys by the California Fish and Game Department have also shown increases in some waterbirds in Drakes Estero. Increasing numbers of Brown Pelican have resulted in a pending delisting from the Endangered Species list (<http://ecos.fws.gov/speciesProfile>).

The upward trend of Wood Duck may be the result of a nest box project that Rich Stallcup has been conducting with local Boy Scouts. Increased wetlands protection and a decrease in hunting may also be contributing factors. Double-crested Cormorants have been breeding in greater numbers in many colonies recently and our trend may reflect that.

An increase in the number of Eurasian Wigeon may be a result of observers becoming more skilled at picking them out of flocks of American Wigeon. However, that would suggest that our counters lacked those skills in the past. An increase in Alaska breeding would contribute to increased numbers wintering in California. Numbers of Mallards are up considerably; this pattern has also been seen at Bolinas Lagoon (<http://www.prbo.org/cms/369#mall>).

■ Raptors

The first half of the 20th century was a period of tremendous development and associated habitation destruction in California. Many raptors declined in numbers. Since the 1970s there has been greater protection of habitats and a growing awareness of wildlife issues. The beginning of the PRPCBC coincides with this period of changing attitudes, and some of the upward trends of raptors on our count may reflect those changes.



Long-billed Curlew (*Numenius americanus*) numbers have increased at Point Reyes. Photo/David Wimpfheimer

Red-shouldered Hawks seem to be thriving in many parts of California. Their populations are rebounding from previous levels when they were hunted. Now the hawks are nesting in golf courses, cemeteries, and other urban tree zones. (Allen Fish, pers. comm.)

In recent years, the Point Reyes area has often led the country in numbers of Peregrine Falcon. Declining numbers of the species due to DDT poisoning is a familiar story. Because the beginning of the PRPCBC coincides roughly with both the initiation of a very successful captive-breeding program of Peregrine Falcon and the banning of DDT, an upward trend would be expected. In 1970 less than a handful of Peregrine Falcon pairs were breeding in the western part of the country. Now there are hundreds.

While there are several breeding pairs of Peregrine Falcons at Point Reyes, most of the wintering individuals are migrants. Limantour Estero and additional estuaries in the count circle are habitats for tens of thousands of ducks and shorebirds, concentrating much food for Peregrines and other raptors. Osprey have benefited from a cleaner ecosystem and habitat preservation as well.

■ Shorebirds

Large estuaries here are feeding areas for thousands of Dunlin and Western and Least sandpipers. Difficulties with weather, tides, and observer skills may make the use of our data for monitoring peeps and other small shorebirds especially problematic. Counting larger shorebirds accurately is easier. An analysis of birds observed per party hour shows an upward trend for Long-billed Curlew and

Marbled Godwit. This is in contrast to recent studies that reflect a general decline in Marbled Godwits along the California coast (Warnock, et al. 2006).

■ Land birds

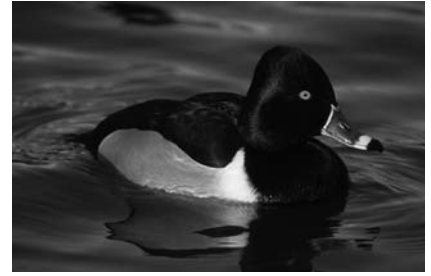
Some land bird species have increased in number as the level of our participation has grown recently. In 2006, 213 participants counted 866 Townsend's Warblers. This total was more than twice the previous high, but measured by bpph, this species does not show an upward trend. Nuttall's Woodpecker does show an increase, measured by raw numbers and bpph. I have not heard an explanation for this increase and I have not studied if the species has increased on other counts nearby. Whether this trend continues now that Sudden Oak Disease is causing the loss of thousands of oaks and other trees in the area remains to be seen.

Based on birds per party hours, the trend of Common Raven is slightly up, but American Crow does not show such an increase. Increases in the number of ravens and crows in the San Francisco area have been examined previously (Kelly, et. al. 2002). The subject is complex and beyond treatment here. Still, the negative impacts of increasing corvid populations and resulting predation on sensitive species are of great concern.

The upward trend of White-throated Sparrow may reflect the growing ability of our counters to identify these birds from other *Zonotrichia* sparrows.

Decreasing Species

Populations of ducks are always changing. Totals of the 1958 Tomales Bay CBC in *American Birds* show the listing of one Wood Duck and one Ring-necked Duck in bold type. Both species are considerably more common now. In the same listing, 18 Redhead were not considered noteworthy, and not in bold type; however, we have missed the species in several of the last 10 years. Widespread declines of Redheads have been observed in different parts of the continent in the last decade.



Ring-necked Duck (*Aythya collaris*) has recovered from historic low local numbers. Photo/David Wimpfheimer

Declines in White-winged Scoters have been documented previously (Slattery et. al. 2003). Our data reflects this decline.

The pronounced decline of Loggerhead Shrikes is dramatic. Birds seen here are migrants from other areas, because these distinctive small predators only breed marginally in the count circle (Shuford 1993). Numbers of wintering shrikes detected on Christmas Bird Counts declined survey-wide from 1959 to 1988 (Sauer et al.1996).

The 1995 Mount Vision Fire burned about 12,000 acres, mostly within the count circle. A large percentage of the fire zone was comprised of coastal scrub, preferred breeding habitat for Wrentit. The following year, only 189 Wrentit were found on the CBC, well below its long-term average. CBC totals of this species did increase the next few years; however, based on both types of monitoring this species is showing a gradual decline.

Variable Species

Participating in any CBC, whether a big and famous one or an obscure count most people have never heard of, is always exciting. As a compiler or participant I always want the weather to be good, to see many birds, and to find uncommon species. Often that does not happen. The weather may be terrible. And it may seem as if "there wasn't much out there." Uncertainties of weather, participant levels, and other factors may contribute to highly variable species totals.

In the history of our count, certain species have shown a greater variability than others. Most are the same ones that show great fluctuations in other counts across the continent: seabirds, thrushes, and finches.

On the 2002 CBC, Peter Pyle, a seasoned seabird biologist, climbed to a perch on Elephant Rock at McClure's Beach in the National Seashore. He practically had to tie himself to the rocky cliff due to the hurricane-force winds that day. Driving rain almost made his scope useless, but the "wonderfully wild weather" had one positive effect. It forced a large number of Northern Fulmars almost right onto the beach. Peter counted 3018 fulmars that day, a total that became an all-time CBC record. The next year, in nice weather, Peter and other counters recorded an amazing 12,736 Northern Fulmar. We speculated that there must have been a large amount of food concentrated nearby or, perhaps, a lack of food in other regions. The species has only exceeded 108 on five other years.

The haunting, almost mystical vibrating flutelike call of a Varied Thrush and the sight of one of these handsome birds can feel like a reward to even this veteran counter. We had many rewards in 2006 and so did participants in many other California counts. The previous year we recorded 300 on the PRPCBC, more than any other count on the continent. In 2006, we were amazed that our total was almost 10 times that number: 2827. Even nonbirders were remarking on the robinlike birds in their backyards. Clearly, the food was good for them here, but more than likely, these frugivores were starving in areas to the north, causing them to migrate in much greater numbers than usual.

Red Phalarope and Red Crossbill not only share a descriptive word in their names, but they are both found in highly variable numbers on coastal California counts. In 1984, 1090 Red Crossbills were observed on the PRCBC; the average for all the other years is 22. As in the example of the Varied Thrush, the availability of food here, or lack elsewhere, had to be a factor. Red Phalaropes can be driven to coastal estuaries by the high winds of a winter storm. Such events happened in 1977 and 1995 when 1304 and 2596 Red Phalaropes were seen, respectively.

The species average for all the years is 27. One lesson in all these numbers is that bad weather along the coast can often mean good birds and good totals for counters.

Rare Birds

Our compilation dinner is a huge event, and the evening builds to a climactic ending as leaders from every group share what, if any, uncommon birds they found. Perhaps they did not discover a rarity, but found that being in the field in a unique area with friends was special enough. Sometimes they saw uncommon mammals—a whale, weasel, or even a mountain lion.

When such a large number of skilled observers are placed in the field, it is common that uncommon birds are found. Among the more unusual birds that have been seen on the Point Reyes count are Arctic Loon, Wedge-tailed Shearwater, Emperor Goose, Baird's Sandpiper, Tufted Puffin, Snowy Owl, Brown Shrike, Bell's Vireo, Eurasian Skylark, Yellow-throated Warbler, Chestnut-collared Longspur, and Scott's Oriole.

Of the rarities, probably the most celebrated was the Skylark first discovered on the 1978 count; it was seen again the next six winters. Before the days of the Internet, identification of difficult species was a more laborious process. The bird, the first record of its species in mainland North America, was identified as a Smith's Longspur for several days initially. Don Roberson reports that the "great mass hysteria" of 1978 has been repeated in birding's oral history over the decades until the actual story has been so distorted as to lose all sense of the truth (www.montereybay.com/creagrus/CAChronoSkylark.html)

The cumulative species total for the Point Reyes CBC stands at 287. Undoubtedly that number will grow in the future.


Summary

When I was asked in 1987 if I would take over the reins as CBC compiler, I decided it would be a good way to learn species distribution. The position's responsibility became my gift to the bird-

ing community. Susan and I had no idea of the workload involved. We have spent thousands of hours making sure that the count circle was covered properly and that the data was compiled accurately. We wanted to have a large number of counters participate so all the areas could be covered with maximum efficiency. I also wanted to ensure that every bird possible was counted. These goals may not have been practical. Nonetheless, I feel extremely proud that 20 counts were conducted efficiently and that the data assembled forms a valid and important record of winter bird populations here.

It has been a privilege to work with many fine people who have participated in the count for decades. Among them are Neal Blank, Peter Colasanti, Dave DeSante, Jules Evens, Gary Fellers, Keith Hansen, Roger Harris, Alan Hopkins, Bill Lenarz, Gary Page, Mike Parmeter, Peter Pyle, Dave Shuford, Dianne Sierra, Rich Stallcup, Lynn Stenzel, John Westlake, and Jon Winter. George Bing is in a small group that has participated in every count. For 38 years, George has maintained a family tradition of counting, first with four of his sons and more recently with his grandchildren. I regret that space limitations prevent the inclusion of other names here. Clearly, this has been a monumental team project; many other people have been involved with the count and contributed to its success. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to you all. There is a genuine love for this special area that goes beyond the birds here. A sense of community has been established by the long tradition of this count.

I was incredibly fortunate when Susan Colletta became the co-compiler. She took her contribution to citizen science quite seriously and has been an incredibly hard-working co-compiler of this CBC. In addition to thousands of hours of computer work, her personalized attention to each counter is one of the main reasons our participant level has increased significantly since 2000. The compilation meal celebration, attended by more than 170 counters, has become a widely successful event, and Susan deserves much credit for its popularity.

The Christmas Bird Count is all about numbers, many numbers. I have tried to make some numbers more relevant and share some of our more dramatic stories here. It has proven to be an excellent tool for monitoring bird populations at Point Reyes and across the continent. We rejoice that some species trends are upward. For those that are declining, we all must rise to the challenge, sound the alarm, and take action to reverse those trends. 

Acknowledgements

John Kelly generously shared his knowledge of statistical analysis and advised me. Jon Winter provided information on the early history of the CBC. Most of all, Susan Colletta profoundly raised my awareness and helped me appreciate the human element behind the numbers.

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“Coo-weeep... Hup, hoo-hoo, hooo”

This is how the 38th annual Point Reyes Peninsula Christmas Bird Count (PRPCBC) compilation dinner began last December. I knew it was my last gig as co-compiler of this unique occasion and I wanted it to be memorable for all. A standard greeting seemed boring, so I whistled the female Spotted Owl's “*toweeeeeeip*” and was enthusiastically barked at by the obliging men in the room: “*Coo-weeep... Hup, hoo-hoo, hooo.*” I still blush at the memory.

As I look out at the huge covey of volunteers, I recognize many of the same people who have given their heart and soul to the PRPCBC over its history. I secretly giggle at the windblown faces, the sunburned foreheads, and the uncombed hair. Many have traveled quite a distance. A few have slept in their car to owl. Over the years, as organizer, I have taken pride in their diligence. I admire these birders for their contribution. I recognize that these people are tremendously committed to this day, and each one of them performs an exemplary job within their appointed bird habitat.

I was introduced to both birding and to the PRPCBC nine years ago. My first CBC was spent gawking at these bizarre people who called themselves “birders.” I was intrigued by their demeanor. I learned to recognize the particular rakish head tilt of any birder who saw a rare species and was keeping it secret until the big reveal. The saunter of those who knew they made a distinctive contribution. The exhausted half-lidded stare of the owl. I envied the recall chatter: a particular bird, its location, its behavior. The boisterous banter could be offset by serious comments about a miss on a diminishing species. Over time I became fluent in “bird” and fledged into a qualified field participant. I even felt the thrill of my own “rare bird” swagger.

When the day is done, this weary group knows a terrific meal is waiting for them at the community center in Point Reyes Station. The PRPCBC compilation has become so popular, it is now, officially, a shindig. The lively holiday happening has an atmosphere that combines both seriousness and fun, and the event reunites many longtime friends for the day. The catered meal is delicious, fresh, local, organic, and bountiful. As I became familiar with the birders I started putting habitat area and expertise to a name and weather-pounded face. I was shy at first. I began to know people through email and by writing personal appreciative notes on the invitations. Each CBC season became friendlier for me and I developed genuine relationships that lasted the one day.

I felt compelled to improve the ambiance of the compilation dinner by adding soft touches such as tablecloths, placemats, flowers, and sparkling water. I initiated a reservation system.

We've celebrated a birthday and we've remembered the deaths of fellow birders.

I made changes to the routine of the species countdown. Instead of calling out “yes” when a species is seen, I initiated “bird speak.” Mimicking owls, quail, and songbirds is great fun. Peppering the night with questions for all created a friendly ruckus. “*Who saw a mountain lion today?*” The volunteers enjoy giving recognition to their comrades, so we applaud everything CBC—from the first-timers and lifers to the rare sightings and captivating reports.

A year that none of us will forget was 2002, when 132 courageous knuckleheads went out in Typhoon Pongsona that blew through from Guam. The stories ran the gamut from funny to heroic to dangerous. Trees fell on cars and people were blown into the churning bay waters. We sat around in our starched muddy clothes and related our tales by flashlight.

By then I had my own area and my own CBC buddies. I was blown down a steep hill that day and was covered in cow runoff. I stood up and within 20 seconds was washed clean by the warm torrential rain. Baptized a CBCer for life. — **Susan Adele Colletta**

Susan Colletta is a retired visual effects producer. She volunteers for various critter causes and authors a wildlife column for a West Marin newspaper.