

In the late 1800s New York City was the center of a fashion feud. Throughout the city, women's hats were festooned with feathers—plumes that had been plucked from birds such as herons, cuckoos, egrets, and even owls. Fortunately, not everyone approved of the craze. Newspaper stories with grizzly pictures caught the public's attention, and some Americans denounced the slaughter, publishing in journals and forming protest groups. Eventually laws were passed, and the feather trade diminished.

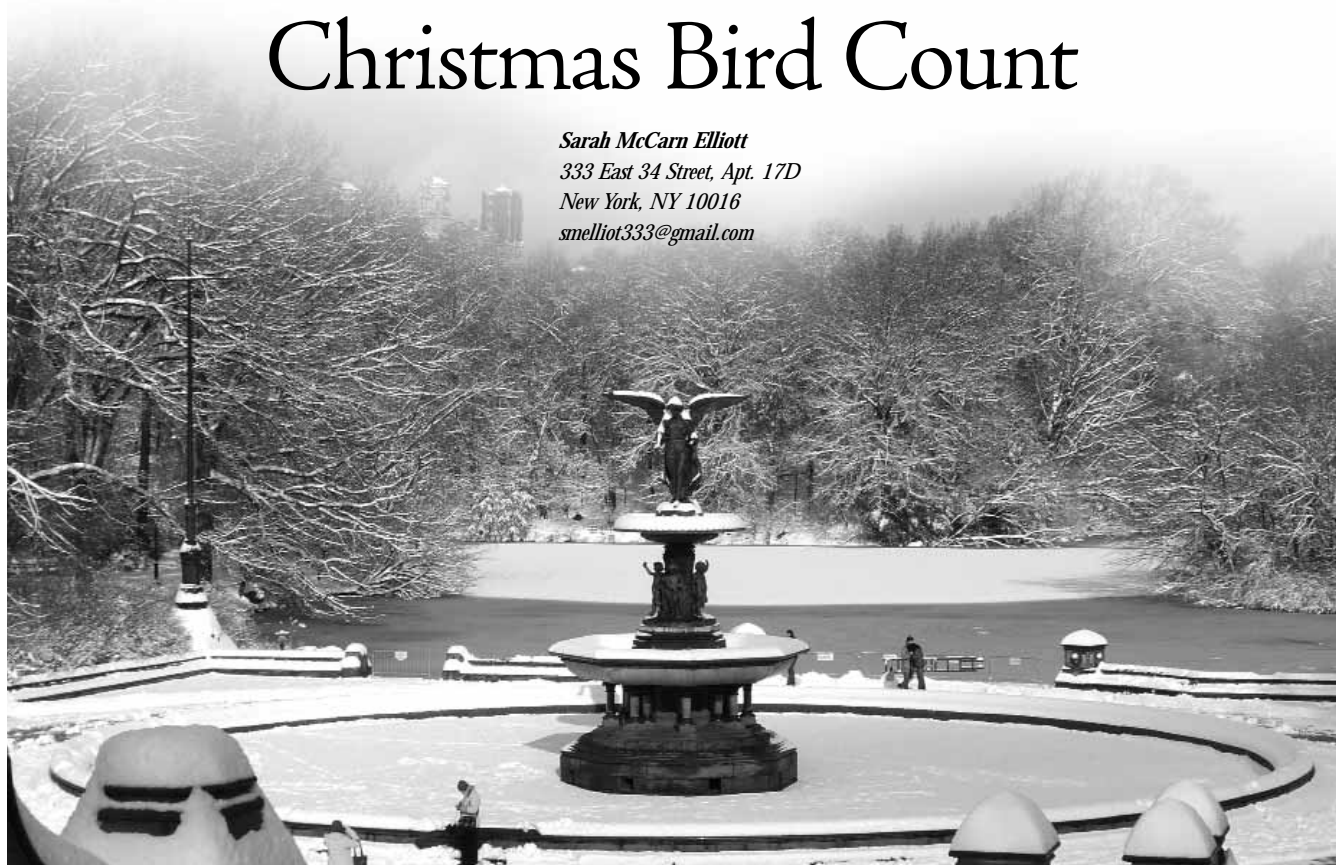
The feather war lasted nearly a quarter century, focusing public attention onto birds and their defenders, supporters who became a part of the Audubon movement. One of these champions was Frank Chapman, a curator of ornithology at the American Museum of Natural History and the man who established the magazine *Bird-Lore* in 1899. Chapman proposed a possible solution for another kind of bird slaughter, that of the sport of shooting birds and other game at Christmas, where the hero of the day was the man in the hunting party who brought down the biggest haul. Chapman suggested to some of his friends that they should go out at Christmas to count birds, not kill them. In 1899, he organized a trial count that took place in various locations. Participants were asked to describe the weather, list the region, and tally their time and birds encountered. Two counts were made in the area on that day—one in Princeton, New Jersey, and the other in New York City's Central Park.



Not Just a Walk in the Park

New York's Central Park Christmas Bird Count

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In the center of the park is the Ramble, Olmstead's beautiful 37-acre "wilderness" of shady glades, streams, pools, trees, flowers, bridges, and swirling foot paths that lead travelers from 72nd Street to 79th Street. It was meant to soothe the spirit and refresh weary city strollers; today it is world famous for the numbers of birds and birdwatchers it attracts.

Making History in Central Park

Central Park was designed in 1858 by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. In a time when parks were laid out for the wealthy, this large park was meant to be free for everyone, including the working poor. Central Park is an 843-acre rectangle of green that stretches two and a half miles north from 59th Street to 110th Street and a half-mile east-west from Fifth Avenue to Central Park West.

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Pictured, left top: Central Park attracts people—and birds—from all over. This Boreal Owl (*Aegolius funereus*) was a CBC treat on the 105th CBC.

Photo/Lloyd Spitalnik. Left bottom: The design and features of the park make it a treat for humans and birds alike.

Photo/Robert Paul Young/Wikimedia

Above: Central Park is an oasis of green amid the sea of city buildings, and is a haven for wildlife as well as an escape for New Yorkers. **Map/Central Park Conservancy**

pools, trees, flowers, bridges, and swirling foot paths that lead travelers from 72nd Street to 79th Street. It was meant to soothe the spirit and refresh weary city strollers; today it is world famous for the numbers of birds and birdwatchers it attracts.

Part of that experimental season, and the first person to do a Christmas Bird Count in Central Park, was Charles Rogers, a 12-year-old birding enthusiast. His count and that of the Princeton counters were duly reported in *Bird-Lore*. Those first participants were enthusiastic, so Chapman proposed the count to his readers in the October 1900 issue of the magazine.

The first *national* count was held Christmas Day in 1900, and 25 reports were published in the February 1901 issue of *Bird-Lore*. For this, his second count for Central Park, Charles reported 12 Herring Gulls, a Downy Woodpecker, four starlings, "abundant" White-throated Sparrows, two Song Sparrows, and a robin. Charles must have bragged about

his accomplishment because a year later he shared the glory with two other boys, Clinton Abbott and George Hix. All three went to Central Park, but they didn't bird together. George went early and reported four species, including 1000 Herring Gulls and 51 starlings. The day had turned damp and overcast when Charles arrived. He saw the gulls, about 100 White-throats, and a Golden-crowned Kinglet. He also reported seeing three bluebirds on December 15. Clinton Abbott arrived late in the morning to count birds in light rain and south winds. His report added Fox Sparrow, cardinal, and Brown Creeper to the park list.

A Tradition With a Long History

More than a hundred years later, the Central Park CBC is still going strong. A park birder since 1960, I joined the count in mid-1970s. In those days I was considered an avid birdwatcher, and in 1968 I began leading bird walks for the National Audubon Society. Later I was doing walks for the New York City Audubon chapter as well as writing articles for their newsletter. I frequently birded with Dick Sichel, the compiler for the park's Christmas Bird Count; in 1985, 20 years later, I became the next Central Park compiler.

Going back through the records, it's fascinating to learn about the early years of the count. When the time came for the fifth park census, seven people stepped up. It was cold; one of the counters reported four inches of snow on the ground. All of them saw Black-capped Chickadee, most saw Hairy Woodpecker, two found Hermit Thrush, and there were single reports of junco, Red-shouldered Hawk, and American Crow. George Hicks came early and searched the north end of the park. He left and returned to the Ramble in the afternoon. His find of the day was a European Goldfinch, an import.

Sarah McCarn Elliott, a birdwatcher for 50 years, has led countless bird walks for Audubon and other organizations. She and Lambert Pohner produced park bird and butterfly pamphlets and led bird classes until his death in 1987. In 1975 she started the Bird Book, a notebook kept at Central Park's Boat House restaurant where birders list new arrivals by name, date, and park location. For 15 years Sarah has produced "The Elliott Newsletter: Nature Notes from Central Park," about birds, trees, flowers, insects, and mammals. Much of this information will be folded into her forthcoming book Four Seasons in Central Park.



Waterfowl of an amazing variety are attracted to open water in Central Park, and occasionally Wood Ducks (*Aix sponsa*) can even be tallied on CBCs. Photo/Don Riepe

Two years later, the weather for the seventh Central Park count was cloudy, windy, and cold. Charles Rogers and George Hix were there but not together. Each of them saw 14 species of birds, including Red-tailed Hawk, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and “Purple” Grackle. On December 23, Clinton Abbott and R.E. Stackpoll saw a grackle as well as a Chaffinch, another import and a species never tallied in the park again.

After that count Charles Rogers slipped out of Central Park and went to watch birds in Princeton Woods. In time, he became a professor at Princeton University. In 1939 he received a visit from an adolescent bird enthusiast named Peter Mott. He took Peter on as a birding student and together they watched birds once a month for the next five years. Peter participated in the Princeton Christmas Bird Counts with Rogers, who was the compiler at the time. Years later Peter Mott served twice as President of New York City Audubon and has occasionally participated in the Central Park Christmas Bird Count. These events are not just a coincidence, but a concatenation!

Anne Crolius was probably the first woman to do a Christmas Bird Count in Central Park. On the ninth CBC she reported 16 species, including American Goldfinch, towhee, and Carolina Wren.

She returned for the tenth count and again listed 16 species, this time with Winter Wren, Brown Thrasher, Sharp-shinned Hawk, American Goldfinch, and best of all, a male Baltimore Oriole that had been hanging around for two weeks.

An all-woman group counted in the 17th Central Park CBC during World War I. Mrs. Fisher, Ruth Fisher, and Farida Wily worked not as lone rangers but as a team. They saw 10 species and 631 individuals, including 13 Black-capped Chickadees. They searched but did not find the “Brown-headed” Chickadees (now Boreal) that had been thrilling birdwatchers that year. After World War II, Farida Wiley was the first person to lead what became popular spring bird walks in the park.

Irv Cantor, now in his late eighties, is sturdy and alert, and visits Central Park often in spring and fall. Younger birders (those not older than 60) call him Irving and fling out his name to enhance their status among birders. Irv remembers that there were very few birders when he was young. The weather was much colder then. Few trees provided food for the birds and there were no bird-feeding stations, so when winter came the birds left. Now birders run a bird-feeding station from early fall to late spring, presided over by enthusiasts, most recently Neil Emond. Seed and suet

attract and keep birds through the winter, allowing American Goldfinches, redpolls, and many other birds remain for the count.

When Irving did the Central Park count in 1935 he was alone. It was 21 degrees Fahrenheit and the park was covered with snow. He was out from 9:30 A.M. to 2:30 P.M. and tallied 16 species of birds; his report was published in *Bird-Lore*. Irv thinks some of the birds he saw in 1935 were not counted in 2008. Back then, he saw Green-winged Teal, two pintails, a pheasant, and 18 Wood Ducks. He counted 175 black ducks but only 40 Mallards. I called him to make sure there really were 18 Wood Ducks. It was true. The ducks were in a hole in the ice at the 59th Street Pond, which otherwise was completely frozen over. Irv continued to do the counts, but not in Central Park. He went to the Bronx to join a group of keen, young birders that included Roger Tory Peterson.

A New Era and Great Finds

In the 1960s and 1970s Dick Ryan ran the Central Park count, presiding over the day in the park and tabulating reports from other locations. Collectively, these counts covered a required area 15 miles in diameter. Dick then moved to New Jersey and organized a

new 15-mile area from counts on both sides of the river, and Central Park became a part of that count, the Lower Hudson circle. Dutifully, Dick kept a full set of records in a box inside the small zoo where he worked; unfortunately, the box was removed and years of separate counts were lost, with only the aggregate of the Lower Hudson count remaining.

From 1971 to 1984 Dick Sichel ran the Central Park count and reported his records to Dick Ryan. In 1977, the count had 25 participants, a record number for the count. Participants during those years were always treated to hundreds and thousands of Herring Gulls, hundreds of Ring-billed Gulls, thousands of Rock Pigeons, and hundreds of House Sparrows. White-throated Sparrows appeared in modest numbers, except in 1982 when 355 were counted, exceeding a previous high of 118. Common Grackles numbered less than a dozen per year, except in 1978 when we had 532 of them.

Duck numbers in the Reservoir section of the park have varied greatly, but the star of the Reservoir in the 1980s was the Tufted Duck—common in Europe but not here. In the days before the count, my birding partner, Lambert Pohner, went to the Reservoir in all kinds of weather to tease out this treasure. With great diligence, one Tufted Duck was found in the Reservoir for each of the counts between 1981 and 1985. The word went out and people came from far and wide to see it. Lambert would keep tabs on the bird through the winter. One spring day he saw a female fly into the Reservoir and quickly sort her way through the population, rejecting would-be suitors. According to Lambert, when the female found the lone male, she must have told him, “Okay, Big Boy, you’re it.” Lambert saw the pair rise and fly away, together.

Ring-necked Ducks are found all over North America but are seldom seen in Europe. They are seldom seen in Central Park, either. It’s hot news when this species appears in the Reservoir; single

birds were counted in ’55, ’64, ’81, ’82, ’83 and ’84. Iceland Gulls, as their name suggests, are also rare here; one was found in 1976 and another was found in 1985. Many out-of-state birders came to see the gull.

The Count Gains Momentum

With the annual counts becoming more of an event in the 1970s and ’80s, people started to take notice. Although I had been birding in Central Park since 1960, and frequently birded with Dick Sichel, I yearned to join his Christmas count. One day in 1975 he asked me why I didn’t. Because, I said, I hadn’t been asked. He laughed and explained that anyone could come and count, so I joined immediately. In those days, about two dozen people went to five sections of the park and counted birds in small groups. We stopped at about noon and met at the Boat House, a Central Park restaurant at about 74th Street, on the shore of the lake (where they rent out the rowboats), to eat and tabulate our birds. It was usually hard to hear each other over the din of the surrounding customers, but these events certainly were jolly.

On Dick’s watch we got a lot of media attention. Paul Montgomery of the *New York Times* came and wrote us up for what may have been the first national press coverage of our CBC. One of the counters, Dorothy Borg, and I appeared on the front page of the paper, faces covered with binoculars. This really was the first national coverage of these counts, and lots of other news and TV coverage followed. A crew from NBC even joined us to cover the story of the counts across America, with stops in Colorado, New England, and New York. They spent the first hour of our count searching for equipment to replace what they left in a cab. Deep into January, a version of this day appeared on evening news hour with Peter Jennings.

In 1985 Dick Sichel was in the hospital with serious heart problems and I was chosen by New York City Audubon to replace him as compiler. Bookkeeper,



Sarah Elliott with her “Birds Count” plaque commemorating her 20 years coordinating the Central Park CBC, and presented to her the same day the Boreal Owl was found. Photo/Neil Emond

too. Discrepancies between the number of people who signed up and the number of people who paid forced me to come up with a system of tracking counters and fees. We distributed address cards to fill out and hand in with fees; bird lists, arranged in the tally order, to use in the field; a section map to show the shape of each territory and its borders; and a sheet of tips and rules, with the time to quit and where to go for the parkwide tally and party. We were lucky. After a few tough times trying to get seats for all of us at the popular Boat House we were invited to the third floor of the Arsenal and even given food! The landmark building, at 64th Street and Fifth Avenue, is the oldest in Central Park.

People at the park’s north end, or participants too pooped to hike down to the Arsenal, could climb into vans and ride with accommodating park rangers. Once the meal was over we passed out the parkwide tally sheet. People from each section called out numbers when I read out the bird names, and in time the pages filled up with numbers, zeros, and totals.

The big moment came when we got to the section for rare or surprising birds. These names were followed by sighs, and sometimes shouts of joy. When the tally was over, participants would go out to find the “best bird” of the day. Some of the best were warblers—Cape May, Orange-crowned, Wilson’s, Ovenbird,

and Black-and-white; for numbers, four Hairy and four Red-headed woodpeckers; Rusty Blackbird, cowbird, Merlin, Red-shouldered Hawk, Fish Crow, raven, Western Tanager, and Belted Kingfisher.

Two Ovenbirds are on that list. I saw the first in 1987, as I was leaving the park after the count. I told Dick Ryan about the bird when he called from New Jersey for my count totals. Because the sighting was so unusual, he said I needed a picture and more eyes for the report. I called a half-dozen birders and asked them to step into the park on their lunch hour and call me if they saw the Ovenbird. They all did! That day I found out why the bird was still there. There was a homeless man, asleep on the ground, and around him were the remains of a meal. The bird was pecking its way around him, eating crumbs.

The park's CBC continued to get public attention during my time as compiler, and so more people came to take part. With more counters to cover the ground, the park was divided into seven sections. Two big sections were split in half, and each became easier to cover in one morning. Now, instead of finding 6, 12, or 18 species, many more birders reported many more birds. I'm glad Clinton Abbott saw a Brown Creeper in 1901. We see at least one every year now. No other groups in the Lower Hudson count can make that statement.

In 1990, the count showed high numbers for specific birds. There were 12 Red-tailed Hawks, 23 Red-bellied Woodpeckers, 12 Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, 248 Blue Jays, 57 American Crows, 69 Black-capped Chickadees, 270 Tufted Titmice, 42 White-breasted Nuthatches, 230 grackles, 50 cardinals, 48 juncos, 508 White-throated Sparrows, seven Fox Sparrows, and one Western Tanager. In the case of the tanager it was a 100 percent increase. Alas, the tanager died in January and was taken to the American Museum of Natural History; the autopsy proved it was a young male that starved to death.

That 1990 count was surprising for some changes. Since the mid 1980s

there had been a dramatic drop in duck populations, but counters that year reported 58 black ducks and 355 Mallards. And there were no swans, geese, or egrets on the count. There were 568 House Sparrows, but starlings were not listed—in those days they were counted at a roost, not in the park. Considering all of these developments, the total of 5446 birds was surprisingly high. Two reasons explain that success: mild weather through the fall and into December, and enough people to cover all the areas of the park.

Between 1985 and 1994 we tallied 42 to 50 species of birds. During that time, the avian population varied from a low of 3542 birds in 1989 to a high of 5564 birds in 1994. Between 1995 and 2004 we tallied a low of 44 species for 1999, (a disappointing number for our centennial count,) and a high of 78 species in 2002. The bird population varied from 4201 birds in 2003 to a high of 8066 birds in 1998. To tally 4201 birds may seem meager these days, but during the 2003 count we endured the worst weather I've ever experienced on a count. Thunder, lightning, drenching rain, and, I think, a little hail. It was incredibly difficult to peer through sheets of water, and I was amazed we were able to see 67 species that day. I'm also amazed that stalwart folk showed up and kept counting! The party at the Arsenal had more food than guests, but the proud survivors were in very good spirits.

Change in a New Century

These days it's difficult to determine the number of people who come to take part in the counts. Many birders arrive at 8 A.M. and go to the South Pumping Station of the Reservoir. There they are met by David Krauss, who, with a scope and a clicker, has been counting the sleeping gulls for half an hour. The gulls rise in small groups and fly off as birders fill out address cards and turn in their fees. By 8:15, participants have joined one of the seven groups and moved off. Other birders come late, join a group somewhere in the park, but leave before

the end—and don't pay the fee. Still others come late, count what they can, then hand in address cards and fees at the party. In the 1990s my address lists varied between 30 and 50 people. But 86 counters came to count in 1999 for our centennial, and in 1998 115 people paid and were listed. This past Christmas the Arsenal was jammed with birders, probably more than a hundred people came to get the news and celebrate.

Modern technology is having an inevitable effect on the Central Park count. People bring digital cameras to document rare birds. More counters talk to each other on cell phones to send alerts on moving birds—especially the Red-tailed Hawks. Now, when we're at the Arsenal announcing the numbers for each bird, Regina Alvarez enters the numbers in a computer and they flash up on a screen for all to see. Soon we will be able to get almost instant results for each bird as well as totals for the entire count. All this data is fed into the database at National Audubon; eventually we'll learn to make better use of the enormous amount of data. Area weather and topography maps will help, as will a better understanding of how global warming has caused birds such as Tufted Titmouse, Northern Cardinal, and Red-bellied Woodpecker to shift farther north.

In 2003, after running the Central Park Count for 19 years, it suddenly occurred to me that it would be good to stop at 20. My last season as organizer was 2004. Few women have run these counts, and I'm one of the longest serving. On the day of a party to celebrate the passing of the torch I was surprised and touched to receive—with the exception of one sitting grouch—a standing ovation. Commissioner of Parks Adrian Benepe made some kind and jolly remarks. He presented me with a plaque with my bird logo and the motto "Birds Count!" They sure do.

Mother Nature gave us the best treat of all that day—a Boreal Owl. The species had never been seen in Manhattan or Central Park. Birders trek to places around the globe in North

America, Europe, and Asia just to see this owl—and one was right here in Central Park. At first, the count participants called it another saw-whet owl, like the one seen elsewhere in the park that day. Some birders consulted guides but said the owl didn't look quite right. Several people went home and came back with scopes to study every feather. Sure enough, it was the first Boreal Owl for Central Park. It was wonderful that the owl spent a week with us at the famous Tavern on the Green restaurant, where birders from near and far came to pay homage. My friend Jeremy Mynott, author of *Birdscapes*, gave a yelp from England when he got the news. He'd been looking for the Boreal Owl for years.

The Christmas count has changed since I retired. E.J. McAdams, the executive director of New York City Audubon from 2002 to 2006, suggested that staff serve as compiler for Central Park and the larger Lower Hudson

count circle in which it resides. I am grateful not to have to operate all the hardware of the count, but I worry that birds are present but are being missed on count day. Because ours is a half-day morning count, those birders that spot a “good” bird in the afternoon don't know how to report it. Also, unless reminded, the staff at the post-count tally may not explain rules about the importance of including birds in the count period and how to call to report them. This can lead to uncounted birds. The problem could be solved if the information and phone number were printed on the parkwide tally sheet.

Rare birds seen just before or just after the day of the count *need to be recorded in the count period*. Wouldn't you hate to miss a crossbill, Boreal Chickadee, Evening Grosbeak, or Tufted Duck because it appeared near count day, not on it? When the bird is listed as count week, at least you know what year it

showed up in your area. If you hear about a feathered treasure that shows up you can rush out to search for it before it leaves. Birders used to call a birders' hotline number to report such birds. Now tough old-timers think they know it all, so why bother with excited neophytes. Well, as any Boreal Owl can tell you, not every mistake is made by a new birder!

I am grateful for the birds that teach us to see things we never noticed before, and that enable us to have the fun of talking about it all with friends old and new. I am proud to have been a part of what National Audubon Society President John Flicker calls, “A really important scientific endeavor.” “We do not know,” he says, “what our children and grandchildren will see when they look back on our counts, but hopefully they'll be doing the same thing and maintaining this wonderful tradition.” Thank you, President Flicker, and thank you, Frank Chapman! 🐦



Clockwise from top left: White-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta carolinensis*), Pine Siskin (*Spinus pinus*) on thistle feeder, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*), and European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*). Photos/Neil Emond