

The Birds of Christmas in London, Ontario: One Hundred Years and Going Strong

*Peter Read
9629 Glendon Drive
RR #3
Komoka ON
N0L 1R0 Canada
psread@explornet.com*

I was flying high all day. It was a once in a lifetime event—the 100th Christmas Bird Count for London, Ontario. After weeks of preparation and hundreds of emails and phone calls, the day had finally come, with luck sandwiched between two snowstorms. The first system dumped rather a lot of snow, bringing the ground cover to about 8 inches. Though this made getting around a bit slow, it was also reminiscent of the first two decades of the CBC, when wintry weather was the norm, so we trudged onward.

In honor of the 100th CBC, I was determined to persuade at least 100 individuals to be field observers. Once accomplished, and with 74 registered feederwatchers, we had the highest number of participants ever. It was great to have so many feederwatchers because the birds were not as plentiful out in the bush due to the cold and snow, and many of them seemed to be taking advantage of feeders.

One could enjoy the nostalgia of it all. As my son, Rob, and I trudged along in the deep snow, much as many other field participants all over the city and the surrounding countryside were doing, we felt like we were stepping in the footprints of our area pioneer birders, naturalists, and conservationists.

I talked about that with Tony Verboom, who, along with his

father and sons and grandsons, carried on a long tradition of London CBCs. He said he felt great pleasure in doing the route that meant so much to our count—the Wonnacott Farm, west of London. W.E. Saunders, our club's founding father, was likely watching their progress along the river flats from some celestial birding observation post. Saunders, in 1883, was elected to the first regular American Ornithological Union meeting as a nonfounding member. Among other accomplishments, he was a prominent member in founding the Federation of Ontario Naturalists (Ontario Nature) and was instrumental in the creation of Point Pelee National Park. Saunter's winged spirit probably watched the observers at another of his familiar areas of bird study, Westminster Ponds, as they walked along its trails.

I am pleased to say that we were able to cover all the areas our CBC forebears had investigated over the previous 99 years. That included the Sifton Bog

continued



**Right: Pete Read, compiler, and Sue Read at London's 100th count celebratory dinner. Photo/Hugh Casbourn
Pictured above, the London commemorative pin.**

Pete Read is an avid birder and nature enthusiast living near London, Ontario. Since retiring from a long teaching career, he has used his knowledge of natural science gleaned from over 40 years of field study to provide consulting for environmental planning and assessments, and to lead organized nature field trips for various organizations and tour companies. Look for him each spring at Point Pelee National Park or in winter out tramping through the snow on the first Saturday of the London CBC period.



(aka Redmond Pond), thanks to Bill Judd, our oldest outdoor participant at 92. Even the few remaining wild areas at Trott's Swamp, a former hot spot that was drained and replaced by a mall and apartment buildings, was covered by Fran Girling, also in her nineties; she poked her head out the window and looked for birds from the balcony of her apartment. A ground crew stomped along the rail line nearby. A party even covered the same area we believe the two participants on the first London CBC in 1909 had walked, near the forks of the Thames River, the confluence point where London was founded.

The weather of the day was indicative of the old days. Records indicate that winters were quite severe around the early years of the last century. We imagined our fore-birders mushing uphill for miles through piles of snow to complete the CBC, as we were doing on this December 20th. Our temperatures ranged from 5 degrees Fahrenheit for owling to a high of about 14 degrees during the day. The winds were calm to start but escalated out of the east to 9 miles per hour, with gusts to 19. It was partly to mostly cloudy, and a trace of snow fell on some parts of the circle during the day. We had about 8 to 10 inches of snow on the ground, but the bitter, wintry day couldn't hold us back, and we prevailed to make it a truly successful centenary CBC.

Our exciting day ended with a scrumptious potluck dinner at our traditional gathering spot, where we shared not only food but our adventures of the day. We told stories of exciting finds and trends, but also many tales of our past glories on CBC outings. Participants received a commemorative CBC pin that I had designed. At a later club meeting, we again reminisced with a slide show detailing the vast and rich history of our London CBC. It was a fine celebration of our significant achievement.

In the Beginning and Through the Years

Let's turn our attention to the humble beginnings of our London Christmas

Bird Count. Although several counts were undertaken in Canada when the Christmas Bird Census began in 1900, it wasn't until 1909 that London became involved.

The beginning is clouded in mystery, but this much we know. Two teenage boys, Floyd Jones and Alex Eastwood, who probably attended London Collegiate Institute, a secondary school now known as London Central Secondary School, went out for two hours on December 23, 1909. They found nine species of birds: Common Redpoll, Hairy Woodpecker, American Tree Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco, Brown Creeper, White-breasted Nuthatch, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Black-capped Chickadee, and American Crow. The



W.E. Saunders, right, at Wonnacott farm 1930s. Photo courtesy Fran Girling

teenagers likely walked along the Thames River close to their homes in central London.

For what reason did these young people complete the count? The only link I can find that might help to solve the riddle is that a man named J.F. Calvert began teaching at the school in 1909, putting him there at the same time as the students. He was known as a great influence on young people, encouraging them in the field of natural science. His brother, E.W. Calvert, took part in a few earlier counts in other locations, and so J.F. had knowledge of CBC events.

Was the first CBC a response to Calvert's suggestion that they take part in this relatively new concept of counting birds in winter? Was it a school project? Perhaps the school received *Bird-Lore*, the predecessor to *Audubon Field Notes*, which published the CBC statistics for North America, and Calvert or the boys developed an interest in the idea.

Although the two boys were not recorded in any subsequent CBCs for London, Calvert took part for many

years, starting in 1910, and was likely the compiler for many of the early counts. Jones became a member of the McIlwraith Ornithological Club (which later became the McIlwraith Field Naturalists of London), but Eastman moved from the area.

In the first few decades the London counts were in the "vicinity" of London, which meant they were in areas where local birders liked to go birdwatching. Of special interest was the bird-prolific land and forest along the Thames River. Observers tended to start on the west side of London, heading west along the river and into the wilds, often walking to Delaware, Ontario, some 10 miles one way.

As we do today, the counters often made a complete day of it, meeting for supper afterwards. In 1931, a small but hardy group made a campfire in a remote area and ate camp food and smoked pipes while listening to the last of their CBC-collected species of the day, a Great Horned Owl, hooting in the distance. Such dedication!

Once count circles became the rule, around 1950, the core of our circle was located in a number of closely spaced spots, usually centered in west London's Springbank Park. Since 1984, the center has been at the gates to Reservoir Park, next to Springbank Park, to honor my compiler predecessor, Bill Jarman, who lived beside the park.

In 1915, the National Audubon Society accepted two counts from the London area, December 26 and December 28. Four gentlemen took part, two in each count. There must have been an epiphany sometime the next year because the men involved joined forces in subsequent years under the banner of the McIlwraith Ornithological Club.

Although the McIlwraith Club was founded in 1890 by W.E. Saunders, regular meetings did not take place from 1904 to 1914. After the club reconvened officially in 1915, they took on the compilation of the London CBC in 1916. Yet one could almost have labeled it the club's count from the second year of the London count, as many members who

went out in 1916 had already taken part in counts since 1910.

Saunders first came on board as a registered participant in 1916 and took part regularly until 1942. I suspect he had an unofficial hand in the events and compilation of the CBCs as he was so active in the birding community, especially the McIlwraith Club, and was known to bird regularly in the winter.

In 1918, the first female participant mentioned, Mrs. Middleton, became involved in our counts. Since then, many women have taken part.

According to minutes of meetings for the McIlwraith Club, it appears that E.M.S. Dale took over the compilations in 1917; he held that post until 1936. His predecessor, J.F. Calvert, was not in every count after that. Keith Reynolds, a club member and nature columnist for the *London Free Press*, London's local newspaper, became the compiler in 1936 and continued until 1939.

Mr. Dale, Mr. Standfield, Bill Morris, and Rae Brown compiled the counts from 1940 to 1942. Kay Fetherston, granddaughter of W.E. Saunders, was out with him on some of his last CBCs, and she was the compiler for 1943 and 1944. I am not sure who compiled the count from 1945 to 1946, but it may have been Bill Girling, back from the war. He was recorded in the club's minutes as the compiler in 1947, and he continued in that job until 1953. Jim



London Christmas counters in the late 1970s. Photo courtesy Barb Bain

Leach compiled the CBC beginning in 1954, and Bill Girling took back the compiler job in 1965. The next year Bill Jarman took on the role and was assisted by Bill Girling from 1976 to 1982. In 1983 I took over the task of compiling and continue in the role.

Remembering Counts

It's remarkable that London has had a CBC in London for so many consecutive years. One would think that as happens with other counts, some issue would come up to lead to a cancellation or withdrawal from participation. The most significant of those possible issues might have been the World Wars, yet even with the two major conflicts, and the number of field observers down, our counts were still completed. As one could imagine, there are more than enough interesting stories from such a long period (see sidebar below). Most have to do with the weather, which can be nasty. We have

never completely canceled a CBC due to weather but have had to postpone a few. Here a few of the interesting stories I received from people when I solicited memories from our club members.

Tony Verboom Jr. has fond memories of Christmas when he was a young lad in the '50s. Gifts were secondary to his excitement about going out on CBCs with his dad, Tony Verboom, and Bill Girling, one of our compilers. A special memory is the sighting in 1961 of the only Northern Waterthrush seen on the count. He still participates in the CBC, covering his favorite spot, the Wonnacott farm, with his children and grandchildren.

Linda Wladarski, Ross Snider, and Dave Martin, affectionately known as the Down-in-the-Dumpsters, have the dubious honor of covering the London dump for the CBC. They like that spot because with lots of "food" around, the chances of seeing some interesting birds are greatly increased. Unfortunately, the dump grounds are pretty clean and well-kept. They've never seen a Snowy Owl or Short-eared Owl on the count, and usually there aren't that many hawks. Maybe that's because there isn't as much mammal food as one might expect; for example, none of them can ever remember seeing a rat on their annual visit.

The biggest highlight of the dump crew's day is watching the gull parade. Usually hundreds, sometimes thousands, of gulls drop in for some fast food. But

Found in the club's archives, a letter from W.E. Saunders to Keith Reynolds dated December 30, 1942—the last CBC for him and the year before he passed away—is presented here in its original form.

"Last Saturday, 26th we took the Christmas census and it was poor. The day was O.K. but the walking was 8 inches to 2 feet of snow with a crust that would almost bear a fellow but not quite. What a day. Jim Edie and I went to the Spruce Swamp and I walked only partway down the west side, and then sat by a fire while Jim did the rest. 5 species only in there, Gull, Chick, Downy, Cardinal and Jay. And our grand total was only 29 or 30. I have the list of 29 and think there is another; Pheasant??? We had Buffle (Hofferd??) Black, Goldeneye, Am. Merg, Chick, W.B. Nut, Crow, P.H. Lark, Redpoll, R.S.H; R.T.H; R.L.H; Sparrowhawk, Tree, Sp, Junco; Hairy, Downy, Starling

No pheasant, grouse quail, siskin, but we did get Redpoll and goldfinch Screech and G.H. (Hedley)

We had donuts and cocoa in Gord's shack and then my car went to Delaware to see Mrs Johnson. She has done poorly on Cardinals this winter; the most she has seen at once is 20, while last winter she had 24 one day. Too bad. But she had no new ones for the list.

Frances and Kathleen and Marj. walked to Springbank and found 5 Creepers.

Pete Patterson's unit arrived in England about the 21st.

Eli didn't go out on the census, so you see we were short of a lot of good people.

I forgot to tell you that the walking at Wonnacotts was so bad that our party didn't do all the usual places; and Mel didn't go out. The poor chap isn't well and has pain pretty often so that his pep is used up."

because not much dumping occurs on Saturdays, our count day, most times the birds are disappointing. Nevertheless, gulls still show up, take a quick look, and often just hang around while they think about where to go next. The three dumpster counters have reported over the years common gulls to be sure, but they thrill at the discovery of such rare gulls as Iceland, Glaucous, Lesser Black-backed, and even California.

The worse scenario is when the gulls are loafing on top of the garbage hills, forcing the birders to get out of the car and walk to see the birds. These intrepid CBCers always pray for really cold weather, because even if it's only a degree or two below freezing, they still end up with boots covered in a two- to three-inch layer of slimy dump muck, which makes its way into the car, altering the atmosphere in there. Even so, the three consider themselves to be among the luckiest of all CBC counters.

Christmas Counts are a family affair for the Loyer/Leparskas family. Their son, Allan, started while still in the womb and continued for the next 15 years. Dave McLeod was the family's "leader" for most of those years and helped them identify trees, shrubs, and seeds, as well as birds. One year when they were walking through a rather wet spot, young Allan stepped into some mud and promptly stepped out of his boots and into more mud with his stocking feet! Getting the boots out of the clingy mud proved to be quite a challenge. Their daughter, Miranda, took part in the CBC from birth to 2007, a total of nine years. Harriet still can't believe that she and Henry carried their kids all that way, but they are delighted to see that both children enjoy the outdoors and nature.

About 15 years ago Ian Platt and his son, Gavin, were owling just west of London on Westdel Bourne at 5:00 A.M. A city policeman came up wanting to know what the two of them were up to. Ian told him about the CBC and showed him how he was playing a tape for screech owls. The policeman was quite



Anita and Stan Caveney spelling out 100. Photo/Lisette Verbeem

interested and told Ian and Gavin that he had seen a large owl being chased by a mob of crows in the city center earlier in the night. Tick and tick. And so they added Great Horned Owl to their list!

The Statistics

Most CBCers understand how interesting it is to look at the data and make comparisons in the area of trends, to check out the gasp-inducing rarities, or to read accounts of the exploits of the birders. We have sighted 159 species over a century of counting, and we have had reports of four more count week birds and at least two distinct races.

The value of bird feeders in locating wintering species is vastly important. Besides giving opportunities for many of our less active participants, many of the unusual species we've recorded have been found near or at feeders; examples include Dickcissel, Pine Warbler, Baltimore Oriole, Ovenbird, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Hoary Redpoll, Tufted Titmouse, and Northern Mockingbird. Often feeders are responsible for our only sightings of some birds each count, such as White-crowned Sparrow, Brown Thrasher, Eastern Towhee, Chipping Sparrow, and Fox Sparrow. Could we be the Cardinal Capital of Canada without feederwatchers?

Our CBC ground crews have also encountered some really special species for our area: a Common Loon, trapped by ice and rescued; a late lingering Green Heron; a recent trio of Trumpeter Swans; and others such as Sora, Sandhill Crane, American Woodcock, California Gull,

American Three-toed Woodpecker, American Pipit, Black-and-white Warbler, Northern Waterthrush, Yellow-breasted Chat, Lincoln's Sparrow, and Spotted Towhee. We also have single records with poorly written or no documentation. These include Common Tern, Gray Jay, House Wren, Blue-winged Teal, Turkey Vulture, and Broad-winged Hawk. Count week highlights include Yellow Warbler, Bared Owl, Nashville Warbler, Band-tailed Pigeon, and American White Pelican.

There are many other rare birds for our area that we've counted just a few times over the years. Ones that might not be expected to be encountered again, if ever, could include Loggerhead Shrike, Virginia Rail, Northern Rough-winged and Barn swallows, Black-backed Woodpecker, Thayer's Gull, Long-tailed Duck, Boreal Chickadee, and Red Crossbill. Though we had two out of three years recently with Double-crested Cormorant, one doesn't expect this species to linger. Nor would we expect too many Horned Grebes, Northern Saw-whet Owls, or Bonaparte's Gulls.

I would expect only the occasional report of Eastern Phoebe, Gray Catbird, Bohemian Waxwing, and Chipping Vesper, and Savannah sparrows. But with climatic changes it will be interesting to see what happens over the next 100 years.

The Name Game

Because our counts span the century mark, trying to look up information online has led to some interesting problems. For example, we are often

surprised at the names of some of the birds. It can lead to particular difficulties, especially when trying to learn years of certain species or to make the abundance graphs from the CBC website. For instance, I noticed Chewink as a species seen in early counts. Some of you will know that that is the Eastern Towhee, but did you know it was also referred to as the Ground-robin, Towhee, and the Rufous-sided Towhee? I have a reference to a "Spotted" race of the latter bird, which would mean that in that year there was a rare visitor from the west, now known as the Spotted Towhee.

The Snow Bunting was also called the Snowflake or Snow Bird. The American or Common Crossbill is now the Red Crossbill. Duck names often were from hunter's vernacular, so Baldpate was the American Wigeon, Oldsquaw became the Long-tailed Duck, Cobhead is the Common Goldeneye, and so on. There was one reference to Red-legged Black Duck, apparently considered a race of the American Black Duck. And speaking of races, one would often hear the term Prairie Horned Lark. The present Dark-eyed Junco was sometimes split into the Oregon, as well as the Slate-colored, Junco. Our Northern Cardinal has been known as Cardinal Grosbeak, and even War-bird. The Butcherbird was either of the shrikes, as was the Great Gray Shrike. Cedar-birds and Cherry-birds were Cedar Waxwings. Did you know that Northern Harriers were formerly Marsh Hawks, and Great Blue Herons just Cranes? Wild Canary was another name for American Goldfinch. Which do you like for our Common Grackle—Bronzed or Purple? Falcons had other names in the past: Sparrow Hawk, Pigeon Hawk, and Duck Hawk. I will leave you to decide which was which. We have seen the Northern Saw-whet Owl on several counts, but it was previously noted as the Acadian Owl. What would a Brown-headed Chickadee be?

Two of my favorite names, only appearing on one count each, are Bog-sucker for the American Woodcock and

Fly-up-the-creek for the Green Heron. Those nicknames are great, aren't they?

Many of the names are closer alternatives to what we call them now but cause a bit of confusion when you are retrieving data. When looking up a certain "shorebird," it might be wise to try the general name Snipe, as it will be listed under Common and Wilson's. And Goldeneye will come up with choices such as Common, American, and perhaps others. And even our Northern Flicker could be under that or Yellow-shafted Flicker.

So keep an open mind as you look up data online under species.

Conditions Change Over the Years

Going through the count's history, it's interesting to note the changes that have taken place over the years—from how counters got around in the field to the level of participation.

Getting around

One wonders how the early birders got around and found birds during rather risky winters, especially in the early years. Modern vehicles, which allowed participants from different areas to gather into parties as well as complete owling and driving routes, have made a major contribution toward the success of our mission.

Getting around on earlier counts probably meant that counters were restricted mainly to walking. However, I can't imagine some groups walking all the way out to Delaware, a distance of about 10 miles one way, without some kind of transportation back, especially when there was deep snow. I don't find any reference to vehicle use until the 1930s, though I assume getting to locations might have meant using cars even before then.

Cars are a big part of the CBC now, as there are about eight routes that are mostly driving, with counters only stopping briefly to look about or pish at a brush pile. Safety can be an issue in snowy weather, and one must concern oneself with the likelihood of sliding into

some troubles from which only the Canadian Automobile Association or a friendly farmer can save you.

State-of-the-art binoculars, thermal protective clothing, reliable transport, modern communication devices, and efficient networking have totally changed the way the modern-day winter birder gathers and shares CBC data. Ironically, the use of snowshoes, albeit at times made of different materials, does span the years. In 1914, counters were on snowshoes, and we've used them many times since, including this year.

Weather

Weather conditions have shown much variation. Though one day of the winter hardly exposes a trend for a winter season, most count dates have been near the end of December, so one can get a feel for the conditions for at least a few days around the count. With that in mind, it appears that the first 20 years of our CBCs were among those with the most wintery conditions. After a few milder decades, the late 1950s through the late 1980s were typical of our seasons, with good amounts of snow and cold temperatures, enough to freeze even much of the running water. But we had relatively mild winters through the 1990s and into the new century.

This mild weather has led to obvious trends in the number of species and birds counted. We found more individuals and a greater number of wintering species in those years that were milder, for obvious reasons. This is especially true for waterfowl, due to open water allowing them to feed. The opposite conditions tended to reduce the numbers overall, and many birds are found huddled in sheltered spots or forced into feeders.

Participants

Of course, the number of people taking part helps to increase our numbers, even though one likely compares hours and results these days.

The number of feederwatchers is of great importance. Without them we would not

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Four Hundred and Counting *continued from page 23*

Doug Pratt, Bob and Peter Pyle, Tom Quay, Frank (Pop) C. Richardson, Jim Richardson, Ann Rollo, Grace Russell, Will Russell, W. (Froggy) F. Rountrey, Bob Sargent, Don Schwab, Matt Sharp, Dot Silsby, Zelda Silverman, Charlie Smith, Don Snipes, Jared Sparks, Betsy Stephens, Dorie Stolley, Andy and Farimae Tate, John Terborgh, Elizabeth Thomas, Mike Tove, Bob and Dorothy Tripician, Thuy Tran, Tina Trice, Allen and Virginia Valpey, Jessica Waibel-Hou, Phil Warren, Peggy Rommen Waterfield, Romie Waterfield, Andy Webb, Bill Webster, Eddy Webster, Becky and Debbie White, Audrey Whitlock, Claudia Wilds, Bill Williams, Gary Williamson, John Williamson, Ray Winstead, John Withrow, Chris Witt, Townley Wolfe, John Wright, Carl Yelverton, Lee Yoder, John Young, and Bob Zaremba.

Family and friends, most of whom are not birders, have kindly provided warm hospitality and a place to stay over my many years on the CBCs. I want to thank my parents Alberta and Paul Sykes (Norfolk); in-laws, Bill and Edythe James (Norfolk, later Currituck, North Carolina); dear aunts, Florence Carmine and Emly and Mary Gallup (Norfolk); sister and brother-in-law,

Lynette and John Corley (Virginia Beach); sister-in-law and brother-in-law, Phyllis and Marshall Winslow (Virginia Beach); Audrey Whitlock and husband Bobby Halstead (Nags Head, North Carolina); Charlie and Sharon Gambill (Nags Head); Brian and Joan Hope (Delray Beach, Florida), and Howard and Mable Langridge (Lantana, Florida). Deep appreciation is expressed to the following for hosting the compilations at their homes and providing delicious buffets over the years: Floy and Dick Burford, Cooper and Jeanne Barefield, Andy and Farimae Tate, Bob Ake and wife Joyce Neff, and David Clark. I thank Cape Henry Audubon Society for their support of the Back Bay NWR, Bodie-Pea Island, and Little Creek CBCs over the years, both financially (payment of participant fees, postage, and other expenses) and for the participation by its members. The manuscript has been much improved by reviews by Harry Armistead, Ned Brinkley, Connie Isbell, Cam Kepler, Geoff LeBaron, Bruce Peterjohn, Chan Robbins, Will Russell, and John Sauer, to whom I owe a debt of gratitude. I thank Bonnie Kepler for typing the manuscript through all revisions. I particularly wish to thank my dear wife, Joan, for her understanding, patience,

support, and encouragement over almost five decades of my nearly constant absence during the latter half of December each year as I succumbed to the siren call of birds waiting to be counted along the middle and south Atlantic coasts. 🐦

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be nearly as successful, especially with rarities that linger. The first mention of feeding stations was very early, but not recorded officially until the 1940s. Since the '50s, perhaps due to an upswing in disposable income, there has been a general increase in feeder folk. This is not to take away from the contributions of the bush thrashers, who risk life and limb to find stashes of wintering avifauna. These numbers too have generally increased over the years. The biggest jumps came in the mid-1970s and the numbers remain about the same each year now.

Looking Forward to the Next 100 Years

I envy the pluck and dedication of the earlier participants and to the conservation value of the first Christmas Bird Counts. The development of the CBC for avian protection purposes was initiated by intuitive nature lovers when it was noted there were vast populations of birds as well as other species being destroyed.

Unfortunately, the job of conservation is not yet done. The best way we can relate to our fore-birders is through an ardor for the CBC. Let's enjoy that it remains a great way to get together with other like-minded individuals to pursue an event that is truly fun, to garner knowledge, and to accomplish something worthwhile.

And so the London 100th CBC is in the books—quite an accomplishment for London and the McIlwraith Field Naturalist Club of London. That's 100 years of promoting bird conservation through the study of wintering birds. We can be proud. 🐦