

Histories of Christmas Bird Counts in the Central Valley

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The annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count (CBC) is probably the most well-attended and widely known birdwatching activity in North America. Initiated at the start of the twentieth century by Frank M. Chapman (1900), the Christmas Bird Census, as it was then known, quickly took hold and became a major part of the image presented to the general public by the fledgling National Audubon Society. Local CBCs to this day remain newsworthy events covered annually by the media in city and towns across the continent, often making the front page or the evening newscast.

The original idea behind the CBC was to present an alternative to a dubious Christmastime tradition in nineteenth century North America, the "side hunt." This hunt involved groups of local hunters going out to see which side could shoot the most birds in one day. Although this activity had fallen out of favor somewhat by 1900 (Kaufman 2000), Chapman's brilliant idea was to build on the idea and to counter it with an effort to see how many birds could be seen and counted in a circumscribed area within a single day. Aside from promoting the wildlife conservation message of the National Audubon Society (hereafter, NAS), the CBC was initially proposed "as a game or a sport" (Peterson 1948), and that remains its primary function for many — if not most — participants to this day. As such, it has formed a major social cornerstone for many local bird clubs and NAS chapters over the years.

It did not take long, however, for Chapman and others to recognize that, as the CBC effort expanded across the continent, the accumulated data could be analyzed for year-to-year fluctuations in the abundance and distribution of winter bird populations. Unfortunately, the few early "rules" for conducting a CBC, and the type of data reported — aside from the numbers of individuals of each bird species seen — were loosely defined and erratically reported, making comparisons between counts and combinations of data across counts impossible. Observers were asked to report the date, time spent afield, and a subjective and not necessarily quantitative analysis of the weather that day. Information beyond that was up to the discretion of the compiler. Descriptions of the area covered were vague or non-existent. For example, the first Fresno CBC, conducted on 24 December 1911, was described by the participants, Mr. and Mrs. John G. Tyler, as a walk of "five miles along [a] public road" (Chapman 1912) — without naming the road! The concept of a 15-mile diameter count circle was not standardized until the seventeenth CBC. The current standards for collecting and reporting CBC data were developed over time in the 1950s-60s, making it just about impossible to incorporate data collected before that time into modern trend analyses (Peterjohn 2000).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss either the use of CBC data for the study of winter distribution and population trends of North American birds or the pitfalls thereof; this has been done elsewhere (e.g., see the summary in Peterjohn 2000). Some recent papers in the CVBC Bulletin (e.g., Leeman and Edson 2002) have used data from Central Valley CBC circles in their analyses, and doubtless there will be more. The National Audubon Society has a web site (<http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc/>) from which the entire CBC database can be retrieved and analyzed. I believe the wise use of these data requires some understanding of the historical context in which they have been and continue to be collected.

OVERVIEW OF CBCS, 1910-PRESENT

The first CBC conducted in the Central Valley was the Marysville count of 1910; Fresno became the second regional count the following year (see the following accounts for more detailed histories of individual CBCs). There were, however, only a few sporadic efforts to organize counts in the Central Valley until the years following World War II, when the number of CBCs in the region doubled from three in 1945 to six in 1955. After that, the number of counts held annually leveled off until the 1970s, a decade that saw a dramatic increase in environmental awareness, the creation of local NAS chapters, and a subsequent increase in the number of CBC circles in California. The mean annual number of Central Valley counts in the five-year period 1966-1970 was 6.4; by 1980 there were 17 counts. The annual number of counts held thereafter remained fairly constant, at 17 or 18 a year, until the first five years of the twenty first century, during which the mean annual number of counts increased to 22.

Using the map of the Central Valley Bird Club Checklist Area as a guide, 22 recently active (as of 2005) CBC circles are described herein (Figure 1, on pages 20-21). In addition to these CBCs, 18 currently inactive counts were conducted at various times in the past; many of these overlapped current CBC circles. Not all of these old counts are described here, except as they may be related in some way to modern CBCs; for details about them refer to the appropriate issues of *Bird Lore*, *Audubon Magazine*, *Audubon Field Notes*, or *American Birds*.

Not surprisingly, Central Valley CBCs for the most part cluster around major towns. Two large expanses of open country with low human population densities and no large towns, the west side of the Sacramento Valley and the southwest side of the San Joaquin Valley, are virtually devoid of count circles. Though these areas are extensively agricultural lands with limited habitat diversity, occasional CBCs conducted within them (e.g., at Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge) and the results of other winter surveys (Shuford et al, 1998) have demonstrated the potential for recording exceptionally high counts of individuals of selected species such as waterfowl and shorebirds.

Most participants on CBCs of long standing have little knowledge of the history of their counts. Few seem able to even name those individuals responsible for initiating the CBCs in which they participate. The threads that have held together the contextual fabric of some Central Valley CBCs over time have, for various and perhaps inevitable reasons, unraveled in places, and we are in danger of losing some of these strands. If we are to carry the CBC effort into its second century on firm ground, we should be fully cognizant of the historic goals and methodology that have infused our CBCs since their inception.

The following descriptive accounts of Central Valley CBCs have been compiled to help current and future compilers and participants, as well as researchers who would like to use data collected on these counts, understand how these data have been collected in the past and could be better collected in the future. Each account begins with the name of the count and the official 4-letter count code. The center of the count circle is then described, including coordinates of latitude and longitude (degrees/minutes). I hope the individual count histories that follow will foster and maintain your interest in helping on your local counts, and perhaps even get you to think about exploring other counts in different parts of the Central Valley.

LITERATURE CITED

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