

Tips on doing your CBC area

by David Fix

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During the "countdown" following a Christmas Bird Count, have you ever marveled at how each team manages to report several species found by no other group of counters? Along with count circle habitat diversity and plenty of determined birders, this phenomenon is responsible for boosting a CBC total far beyond what would be possible for one team alone to accomplish.

Regardless of what habitat diversity your own CBC sector offers, you can consistently come up with a handful of "goodies" to add to the overall total by going out in the field with several basic birdfinding points borne in mind. Upon being assigned a given area for a Christmas Bird Count, a participant's mind typically mulls over two opposing reactions to the task.

First, an inspection of the sector map shows that a yawningly large expanse is included within those red-inked lines. "How will we ever cover all that?" is a common response.

Second, and later, the counter may think, "But so much of this is just simple roadside with few good spots to hit. We've got one nice flooded pasture and a mile of bayfront. How will we spend all afternoon, after we've covered that?"

The answer is that you'll spend all afternoon covering that! Birding on a CBC is different from the birding we do for fun during the rest of the year. The seeming luxury of sprinting miles from one migration "hotspot" to another is not part of the picture. The day's "sprinting" dissolves, shrunken instead to a well-paced, short-distance progression from one winter "micro-hotspot" to another.

So you've been given a big area to try to cover. What to do? Surely, much attention has to be paid to hitting the known hotspots, and to attempting to find certain target species the compiler has told you **MUST** be uncovered. Beyond that, the strategy is largely in your own hands. Each count sector differs, but several proven strategies will greatly increase your chances of finding lots of birds... with the possibility of discovering a truly rare find.

Although much of the territory that has been assigned to your party may seem mundane, approach the coverage of this unglamorous territory as a challenge. Recall that, while repeated coverage of historically birdy places is productive, it is also a trap. Time spent hitting known hotspots takes time away from searching for others. How many rare birds on Christmas Bird Counts have shown up at entirely normal-looking places... backyards, roadsides, and little leafy hollows entirely off the beaten path?

Consider that much of our routine birding involves intense scouring of a few spots, each separated by many miles in which no real birding is done. Birding during a CBC is different. Every nice-looking habitat microsite ought to be checked. This kind of birding offers an uncommon opportunity to find new hotspots.

On a regional scale, wintering sparrows, chickadees, kinglets, and other hardy landbirds are more or less randomly scattered across the landscape at lower elevations. At the local level,

however, this is generally not the case. These birds form flocks, concentrating at and about food sources, and remaining scarce or in low density between concentration points. Experienced and observant birders recognize that searching through large flocks of common birds is both (a) exciting, and (b) the "Key Of Keys" to locating rare birds.

Think about this. How many Oldquaws, Lesser Yellowlegs, Glaucous Gulls, or Harris's Sparrows are encountered truly by themselves? For the misplaced waif, the rule of Safety In Numbers still holds, as does When In Rome, Do As The Romans Do.

When you flush a couple dozen "crowned" sparrows from along a weedy fenceline, don't think Boredom and Tedium: think Clay-colored Sparrow and Cosmic Siberian Mindbender. Look at each and every bird, until the flock has been reasonably "worked out." The importance of finding and thoroughly scouring such assemblages cannot be overstated.

Another point having to do with sparrow and "chicklet" flocks should be mentioned. Many birders are content to simply stand quietly and "poke" at the flock with binoculars, seeing a bird fleetingly here and there, ultimately managing only glimpses of a handful of individuals. There is elegance and courtesy in maintaining silence while birding, but such situations are NOT the time to personify it! Spish LOUDLY and INSISTENTLY when you find a big swarm of leaf-gleaners or a weed-patch full of sparrows! Don't make occasional soft, self-conscious, underbreath shissy sounds-spish as loudly as you can, for MINUTES! Throw in Pygmy-Owl imitations. Clap your hands a few times. Keep the birds popping up and moving closer onto exposed perches.

I can't recall all the last-minute Nashville Warblers and Swamp Sparrows I have uncovered on CBCs by hammering a big flock until the last bird is seen. No, they won't starve in the face of this distraction, nor each bird suddenly be picked off by a hawk. Bother them for ten minutes, work them thoroughly, apologize if you like, wish them well, then move on.

Is your swarm of hundreds of blackbirds persistently half-hidden in dense short grass? No problem, if you wait a few minutes for that Northern Harrier in the next pasture to wander by and flush them... so you can check for the yellowish foreparts, larger bulk, and baritone krutuk alarm call of a Yellow-headed Blackbird. Are the scores of gulls loafing on the warehouse rooftop all facing into the breeze directly away from your group? That's okay... the wingtips of a young Glaucous Gull will betray it just as well as would a view of its bill. Don't like to struggle over the ID of a female duck? It's okay to not identify it beyond "duck, species."

Spend your time wisely. A final suggestion can be discussed. It's a birdfinding point that is seldom mentioned. In our region we are blessed with a complex landscape, one that offers close-up looks at nearby birds, views of flocks in the middle distance, and a few birds seen perched or in flight in the background. Take fullest advantage of this rich visual scenario: immediately after spishing-up and looking at birds by the road or shore, put off your departure to another spot nearby for five minutes. What do you do?

First, even if you hadn't been using it just then, set up your spotting scope. Second, simply stand back and carefully scan the entire horizon-not with the scope, but with your binoculars. Pay special attention to that "lively edge" existing between the tops of distant trees or fencelines and the low sky in the distance. Good birders spot a great many of their raptors not as sudden fly-bys, or roadside "pole-sitters," but as fairly distant flying or perched "specks." Third, when you've spotted a "speck" atop a far fence post or hillside snag, dial it into focus,

and often you'll find that, lo and behold, the speck can readily be identified.

Over the years, I've found regular use of this "five-minute scan" method to pay great dividends in all manner of raptors, as well as birds down to the size of Black Phoebes, American Pipits, Palm Warblers, and even perched-up male Anna's Hummingbirds singing away from a treetop in the next woodlot! You don't have to identify all you see-no one can-but the point is to strive to perceive all you can from each spot. Don't move on until at least one member of your party has scoped out that surrounding edge a half-mile out. It takes a few minutes, and may result in the discovery of your best find of the day. Nurse a mug of something warm and update your day's list while you check this stuff out.

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