

Hirschy's 50 years of *Christmas Bird Counts*



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Hey, have you ever seen that joke with a long line of birds sitting on the ground along the highway and the comment that they're lined up on an underground utility line? Well, the overhead REC lines have added their thousands to the total of 398,512 birds counted during 50 years of the Richland Center Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs). Of course those lines have harbored the 200 starlings resting near a feedlot, but they have also supported dazzling, bluer than sky, eastern bluebirds that have begun overwintering this far north.

Bob and Jan Hirschy moved to this area in 1967 when the doors of UW-Richland opened, and he became an assistant professor of biology. One year later, Bob organized the first Richland Center CBC. Bob has declared his 59th such bird count to be the last one he will oversee. I asked him what he would do next year and he responded, "Go to the field and count birds."

On three counts a rube-crowned kinglet has been seen.

MY CO-OP



While it wasn't the case in the beginning, in recent years most of Bob's time has been spent in the oversight capacity of keeping the count organized, well fed, and highly enjoyable. Annually, there are around 110 CBCs in Wisconsin alone. Bob says, "Our bird count is not the biggest, we do not tally the most species, but nobody has more fun!" It is here that birders straggle in near midday for chili and hot cocoa. They bring with them stories of the morning's count and will return later with their final tallies.

For most of those 50 years, the central meeting place alternated between the Hirschys' and Floyd and Barb Blackmore's places. Floyd was the other biology professor at UW-Richland.

Jan says, "My greatest memory of the counts was the excitement generated by returning field observers as they reported their sightings. People clapped and cheered when an unexpected species had been observed."

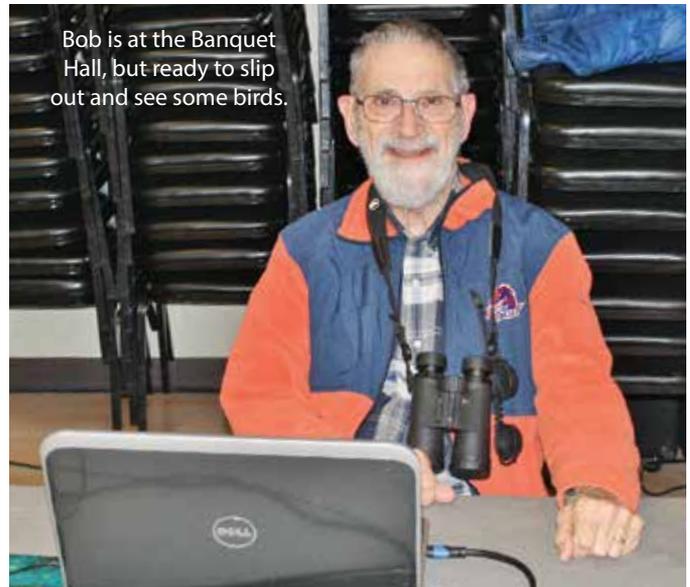
"Our bird count is not the biggest... but nobody has more fun!"

—Bob Hirschy

Let's take a moment to visualize the big picture. The Christmas Bird Count is the world's longest running citizen science survey. The National Audubon Society initiated the counts in 1900. There were only 27 counters at 25 sites across North America. At North

Freedom, one participant recorded 12 species, and the North Freedom CBC lasted three years. In 1967, the year before Bob initiated the Richland Center CBC, 143 locations in Wisconsin had done one or more CBCs and 60 were conducted that year. This year's counts could be conducted anytime between December 14 and January 5, with about 110 counts in Wisconsin. Now, over 50,000 people participate in each annual North American CBC.

Bird count areas comprise 177 square miles with a 7.5-mile radius from a designated central point. Birds of each species seen per hour of observer time provide critical data. Of course, for some birds a higher percentage of the individuals within the count area are seen. CBCs document the relative density of species over time and help discern range changes by species. This helps to document which species are in decline and which ones are doing well. It demonstrates range reduction or



Bob is at the Banquet Hall, but ready to slip out and see some birds.

expansion and the invasion by exotic species. This information helps generate habitat projects and contributes information for other needed conservation action.

On Saturday, December 16, when I walked onto the Banquet Hall at the Richland Square, Bob had a power point set up that presented facts about CBCs and detailed information on Richland Center's count as it entered its 50th year. It showed pictures of some of the volunteers who contributed to the counts over the years. Next came pictures of several birds and graphs that showed the changes in numbers counted over the years.

Coffee and cocoa were already hot. The computer showed who was coming to join the count, the area to which they were assigned, and who they were paired with. Preparations had begun for the chili lunch.

Bob spoke of how the counts used to be submitted and how computers had complicated some aspects of that job. As had always been the case, he would need several hours after the counters' tally sheets were all returned before he could finish compiling the data.

He would need to submit copies of the finished report to the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology and to the National Audubon Society. Those organizations have check-and-balance systems that require supporting documentation for the most unusual sightings.

While 2017 greeted us with a mild day for counting, that didn't always happen. Just like that first count in 1968, the 2016 count day had a temperature range of -15 to -5. Fewer counters show up on those days, but they can expect to see lots of activity at the bird feeders in their territories. Those first three years were so rough that Bob quipped, "It's amazing that we ever continued to do the count." An ice storm in 1977 did make it impossible to complete a count.

Underpinned by Bob's energy, the



Food and stories are part of the meeting place.



A few robins remain through the winter. Inset: From this blurry photo, birders commented, "Wow, a varied thrush."

Richland Center CBC has remained proficient. It has frequently been around fifth in the state in participants even though it operates in a rural setting. Though bobwhite quail have now disappeared from the area, between 1985 and 2001, this bird count led the state in numbers seen 15 times. It led in turkeys seen 16 times between 1985 and 2011, and in cardinals seen five times between 1985 and 1991. Bob attributes those successes to interesting habitat, dedicated local birders, excellent birders coming from farther away, and those hot bowls of chili.

Henry Michael's 12 trips from La Crosse included the CBC the year before he died in 1998. He brought his grandsons with him. In 2010, grandson Will Albertson came from Eau Claire to honor the memory of those fascinating birding days spent with his grandfather.

Don Hagar of the United States Forest Service, who lived on Fiddler Green Road, probably became the oldest participant at about 90 years old. He accounted for over half of the screech owls that have been tallied by the counters. He had a screech owl box by his house that was frequently occupied. On the other hand, the dedicated young birder, Cicero Stewart, was already gaining competence at birding when he first came on a count at 9 years old.

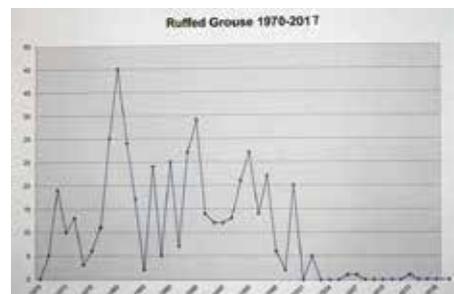
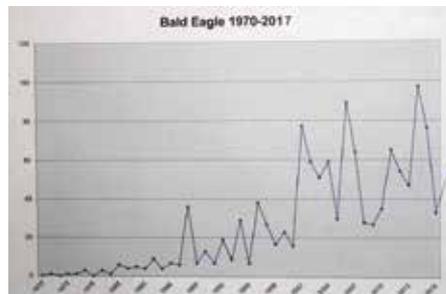
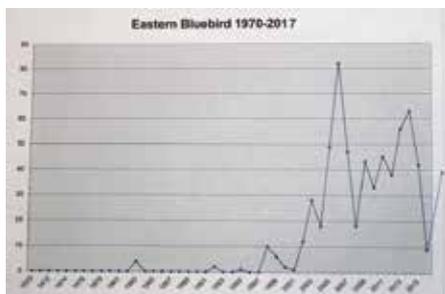
Fifty years reveal some amazing trends in bird numbers. Bald eagle numbers demonstrate their comeback from the DDT era. Wild turkeys were reintroduced to the area in the

early 1980s and came on strong, but now show some population decrease due to loss of nesting and brooding habitat in maturing forests. Ruffed grouse are more significantly impacted by that loss of brushlands. Bluebirds have begun overwintering farther north. Robins showed an amazing anomaly in the mild weather of 2006 when over 500 were counted. The common redpoll is an irruption species that flocks this far south in years when the tree and forb seed crop that they feed on is sparse in Canada. Cardinals, chickadees, blue jays, and juncos fluctuate some but are rather consistent. Of course, number of observers and weather have an impact on the tally.

Some highlights from this year's CBC included tying the high for number of species seen in a count at 58. This was the second year for tallying winter wrens and for eastern towhees. A short-eared owl was seen for only the third time. The 101st new species was added to the 50-year tally as a varied thrush was observed a couple miles south of Richland Center. The 386 house sparrows was the lowest number of them recorded in the 50 years. Yellow-rumped warblers have now been observed during eight of the counts.

Bob is pleased to report that the Richland Center CBC will continue as he passes the torch. Eric Volden, environmental education director at Bethel Horizons, has volunteered to assume the responsibility of carrying on where Bob left off. And we wish Bob many more years of happy birding. 

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Left to right: Bluebirds now overwinter here, eagles are making a comeback, and grouse are in serious decline in this area.



RURAL HUMOR

Humor was always an important part of rural communities.

It included practical jokes ranging from smearing Limburger cheese on the muffle of a newlyweds' car, to stuffing rocks in a grain sack so that the fellow carrying the grain from the threshing machine to granary walked with a staggering gait and a look that said, "I've never carried such heavy grain."

Rural humor could be taking advantage of a city cousin who did not know the ways of the country. One way was to tell the 4-year-old cousin that potato bugs were strawberries and that he should pick them and eat them. Or another kind of humor was giving elaborate directions to a lost city soul when he only needed to travel a mile, turn right, and he would be back on the main highway. Or, another form, allowing a city-bred salesman to cower in his car when the farm dog stood by the car door barking—while the farmer knew full well that his farm dog was “all bark and no bite.”

Humor was a way of making a bad situation better, of finding something good in a situation that was sometimes awful. Of evoking laughter in a situation that was filled with tears. Stories about a farmstead fire, a charging mad bull, or a tipped-over pickup truck. Stories about minor and sometimes not so minor injuries caused by poor judgment or lack of knowledge.

Most communities, mine was one of them, had a storyteller adept at inventing facts and fiction and weaving them into the most outrageous humorous stories that most of us enjoyed, but almost all knew they had not a smidgeon of truth in them. Of course these “truth inventors” themselves became the subject of stories. “Did you hear the story that Bill told last week about the mountain lion he saw in his backyard?” Some

people merely dismissed Bill’s stories: “You just can’t believe a word that old Bill says. He’s an out and out liar.”

Several people in my home community were good with one-liners. For example, “Never buy a horse that is blind in one eye and can’t see out of the other.” Or when I would meet someone and ask, “How you doing today?” I would get a one-line response: “I was born with nothing and I have most of it left.” Or, “I’m feeling a lot better than I ought to for a person of my age,” and several other variations.

Humor allowed country people to live through the tough times, when the rains didn’t come and the crops dried up, when a friend or relative died, when milk prices fell, when someone in the family was injured. When there was a devastating fire.

Country humor was homemade; it was of the people. It was humor that came from the land. And although it may have evoked a belly laugh or sometimes only a chuckle, it cheered people up—and in most instances the story, in addition to being funny, had a deeper message. A meaning that transcended the story. For country people, good weather nourished their crops; humor nourished their souls.



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