

Eugene Christmas Bird Count History
1912 - 2016
by Herb Wisner

An event like this calls for honoring the past to reveal how we got to this point. In the late 1860's George Bird Grinnell influenced by his teacher, Lucy Audubon, went to Yale to study vertebrate paleontology. Fortunately he turned down an offer by General Custer to accompany him to Little Big Horn, which resulted in his later contributions to bird protection. He editorialized in his magazine "Field and Stream" about "game hogs" and the sale of wild game to restaurants. He supported the establishment of the American Ornithology Union and "The Committee for Protection of Birds." He worked for laws to outlaw hunting wild birds and in 1887 started an Audubon Society to focus on these causes. Eventually his efforts resulted in the federal Lacey Act which prohibited a number of activities detrimental to birds, including shooting migratory birds and collecting eggs, nests and feathers for ladies hats. In spite of the law, slaughter of birds continued. In 1900, Frank Graham of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City who was also disturbed by the activities of hunter groups that went out on Christmas day and shot anything in fur and feathers that they could find and sold the products to the markets in the city, proposed an alternative - go out in the field and count birds. Twenty seven people in 25 locations accepted the challenge. The only group on the west coast was in Pacific Grove, California. In subsequent years many more counts were started.

In Oregon, on December 25th, 1912, temperature 42 degrees, Harriet Thompson of the University of Oregon did a solo count by walking out what would become west 11th Avenue looking for birds. She recorded 377 individual birds of five species, one of which was the "Chinese" Pheasant, a relatively new arrival having been released in Oregon for hunting purposes. We could say that her count would allow us to claim a much longer history than merely 75 years but that would be cheating because the next count didn't occur until 1942 when the Natural History Society joined the effort. This would be the 43rd national count. On December 27, 1942 Gordon Gullion organized 11 observers in four groups assigned to cover every type of habitat: Willamette River, Fern Ridge reclamation lake, Hendricks Park, the old airport and college crest. In spite of a rather typical December day: 35 degrees, rain and cold wind, these hardy souls managed to cover lake, river, conifer and hardwood forest, farmland, pasture and swamp. The result was 46 species and 2210 individual birds. Besides the usual species that appear on our counts now, it was interesting to note that they reported Bobwhite, Harris Woodpecker, Northwest Redwing, Northwest Flicker, California Purple Finch, Rusty Song Sparrow and only two English Sparrows. None of the original counters are with us now but if there are any descendants who may have saved diaries or field notes, we would like to have them for the history files.

During the early years of our local counts it has been interesting to see what the checklist included. You could have seen: Farallon Cormorant, White-cheeked Goose, Oregon Towhee, Vigor's Wren, Oregon Chickadee, Coast Jay, Seattle Wren, Yakutat Fox Sparrow, Shufeldt's Junco, Rusty Song Sparrow, Willow Goldfinch, Desert Sparrow Hawk, Alaska Hermit Thrush, and Nuttall's Sparrow. Do you yearn for the old days? Future researchers may be interested to see some species that have been added in recent years: Eurasian Collared Dove, Barred Owl, Jack Snipe, Gray Jay, Williamson's Sapsucker, Red-breasted Merganser, Mockingbird, Blue (Sooty) Grouse, Ferruginous Hawk, Black-chinned Sparrow, Ruff, Falcated Duck, Lapland Longspur, White-winged Crossbill, Pectoral Sandpiper, Hungarian Partridge, Snowy Egret, Ringed Plover, Northern Phalarope, Surf Scoter,

Yellowthroat, Black-legged Kittiwake, Swainson's Hawk, White Wagtail, Arctic and Yellow-billed Loons, Leaches Petrel, Horned Grebe, Clarke's Nutcracker, Red-backed Sandpiper, Greater Scaup, Say's Phoebe, Red-shouldered Hawk, Blue Jay, Bohemian Waxwing, Palm Warbler, Lark Sparrow, Nashville Warbler, Black-throated Gray Warbler, Swainson's Thrush and House Wren. Some of these were one time observations. There was considerable variation in the number of species from year to year. Gradually the number increased until finally, on the 68th count, 113 species were seen and became the first over 100.

No count was made in 1943 because of World War II but from 1944 to the present the Eugene Christmas Bird Count (ECBC) has fielded teams every year. The Eugene Natural History Society sponsored the ECBC from 1942 to 1974. The Southern Willamette Ornithological Club (SWOC) was the sponsor for the next five years and then the Lane County Audubon Society became the sponsor in 1980 and continues to this day. The present day Eugene Christmas Bird Count ends with a free Chili Feed for all participants. For the past several years, nearly 100 wet and cold but happy bird watchers show up to share their sightings for the day.

The number of participants has varied over the years from 11 in 1942 to 255 in 2012. Over all the years, there have been over 600 different participants and more are added every year. We would be interested in knowing who has been involved the longest in order to issue a figurative gold star. In 2008 and again in 2009 we were third among all the Christmas Bird Counts (over 2,500 worldwide) in the number of participants. We have remained in the top ten for the past ten years.

Early counts didn't have any particular rules but as the number grew it became obvious that in order to compare year to year results some standardization was needed. This resulted in counts being limited to a 15 mile diameter circle to be established by the sponsoring organization. The choice for Eugene's center was established as the Danebo School with its geological coordinates selected as 44 degrees 7 minutes north by 123 degrees 17 minutes west as registered with the National Audubon Society. This encompasses most of Fern Ridge reservoir on the west, I-5 on the east, north of the airport and south to Spencer Butte. Our circle has been divided into 27 areas with each area being fielded under a team leader with a varying number of volunteers, some with experience and some without. People of any age or ability are welcome. In addition we have added more than 100 home counters, those who observe birds in their yard. For some early counts we were asked to report a percent of each type of habitat that was covered during the Count. There was a good reason for that since there has been considerable change over the years as orchards are cut down, urban sprawl increases, mall development occurs and grasslands vanish. Weather is also an important factor. Ours has been, on occasion, pretty cold (lowest 7 degrees), abnormally warm (highest 61 degrees), annoyingly too foggy, sometimes even clear, awfully wet but mostly not too bad, snow a few times and once in a while too much wind. There have been a few times that ice covered the open water areas thus having a big influence on water birds and shore birds, some of which moved on or retreated to the rivers. Other requested information includes party hours (on foot or by car, boat, bicycle or skis).

Over the years, bird species numbers were up and down with 1943 having the lowest with 44 bird species. With many more observers the usual species number is now in the 130's with the record at 140 set in 2005. There, thankfully, have been several parties willing to get out before dawn to count owls and brave the elements. Home counters have given a real boost to the number of Anna's

Hummingbirds. Adding observations from all the years gives us an overall total of 224 species. A number of one time out- of- season species helped build this count. The most individual birds seen was 129,874 in 2000. As was mentioned earlier we might yearn for a count of only 2 English (House) Sparrows found in 1942 and the absence of starlings before 1947.

An event that we hope is not repeated was one team's discovery of the body of a man who had wandered away from an Alzheimer's facility.

National Audubon, for a few years, imposed a fee for each participant. LCAS covered that for a time. There are no fees currently.

Our count is one of more than 2500 conducted in the U. S., Canada, Mexico, Central America, South America, and the South Pacific Islands. Collectively, all of these Counts report more than 60,000 observers, 65,000,000 birds of more than 2000 bird species. If you tire (we hope you don't) of the local count you can try Bethel, Alaska (2 species, Raven and Red-poll), South Dakota (maybe 7 species) or go for big time in much warmer climes such as Ecuador which recorded 509 species in 2015. For the greatest number of species in the U. S., visit the coast of Texas or southern California. Local resident Noah Strycker made a count in Antarctica a couple of years ago. The number of species he recorded probably wouldn't need as many as ten fingers if you can get them out of your mittens. That probably would not attract many Eugeneans. If you are out of town on our count day, check to see if there is one wherever you are. All counts are important since they have provided the longest, continuous set of data that pleases statisticians. Dan Gleason puts together an interesting compilation of the Eugene count each year that can be brought up on line at www.audubon.org. Every year, he has to resolve some cases of probable misidentification. It's interesting to note that we have had national high counts in the past for MacGillivray's Warblers (2), Dark-eyed Juncos (3367) and Northern Flickers (548) and state high counts for 14 species during various years. Juncos and Chickadees compete for the most reported species country wide.

By looking back at 75 years of the ECBC, we gain a perspective of the long-term commitment of such an event. LCAS looks forward to future fun, interesting, exciting and informative Eugene Christmas Bird Counts.

Editor's Note: Herb first participated in the Eugene Christmas Bird Count in 1969 and has every year since. 2016 was his 51st ECBC. Herb was also the Compiler for 19 years, from 1986 to 2004.

