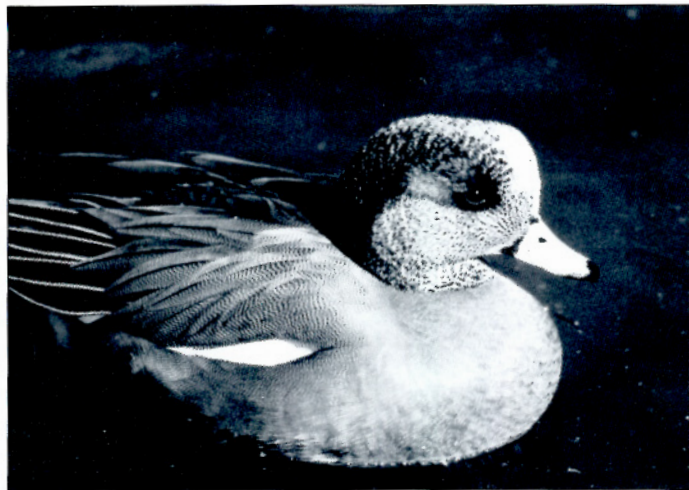


Christmas Bird Counts: For The Birds?

Illinois birders share tales of cold weather counting

by Christine A. Verstraete



Some lucky "duck" might spot an American Wigeon in open water on this year's Christmas Bird Count. Photo by Ken Oberlander.

It was during the 1986 Christmas Bird Count that Wes Serafin, an avid fisherman, finally gave up his tackle and got hooked on bird watching after making the catch of the day.

Serafin of Orland Park remembers that cold day when he was unable to confirm the presence of a Snowy Owl rumored to be somewhere near the Indiana Dunes. "I looked and looked, but couldn't find it anywhere," he recalled.

At the end of the day something drove him to check one more time near an expressway interchange. As he approached the area he saw a birder with a tripod and huge lens. There atop a sign that said "WRONG WAY" sat the Snowy Owl. Serafin was so close to the bird that he could see its yellow eyes. "For 15 minutes it never flew," he recalled. "At the time I didn't realize what an unusual bird it was. It was an incredible first time lucky situation." If you have ever been on a Christmas Bird Count, you may know the thrill of finding rare birds such as the Snowy Owl. You may also know the agony of ending the day with nothing extraordinary to report. Then conversation turns more to the wind, the cold, getting lost, and the hours spent without sighting new birds.

Renee Baade, a Woodstock resident, has had her share of many a rare one on a Christmas Bird Count. But in some ways the most memorable count was in 1991 when she left her house then in Indiana at 4 a.m. to meet fellow birders

some 100 miles away in Gurnee, IL. "It was cold. It was wet and it was overcast. It wasn't a nice day to be birding," recalled Baade.

It was, however, count day and, despite having trouble "even finding a sparrow," the group remained to the bitter end. Their total? Fewer than 30 species.

"It was uneventful," said Baade. "But I did meet some new people and that always helps ease the pain of not finding a rare bird." It also provides a motivating factor for going again the next year to try to make up for the previous dismal one.

That's partially what keeps Muriel Smith of West Chicago, a birder for 34 years, participating in Christmas counts. Besides, her house is in the count circle. That makes it convenient.

Smith keeps several feeders filled and scatters cracked corn on the ground in her backyard which borders a forest preserve and the west branch of the DuPage River. She and her group jaunted around in the neighborhood all day tallying birds during the 1991 count and had just about given up on finding something "exciting."

At the end of the day, the group began to make their list, keeping an eye on Smith's yard just in case. Then Smith saw something land in a tree. "I raised the binoculars and said, 'It's a shrike!'"

Smith got out her scope for a good look and, "By golly, it was a Northern Shrike sitting over at the feeder station!" It is that tantalizing possibility that keeps people coming out in the worst weather hoping to encounter the rare ones.

Get out your woollies and mittens, birders. The Christmas Bird Count is almost here. ➤

Christine A. Verstraete is a writer living in Trevor, Wisconsin, just over the Illinois border.