



A Christmas Bird Count marathon: part 2

by Kelly J. McKay

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Editor's Note: *We last left Kelly on Christmas Day 2002 adding Monk Parakeets to his life bird list while on the Chicago Lakefront, Illinois CBC. Kelly continues his journeys in Andalusia below trying to break the record for most CBCs ever done by a person in a single season.*

December 26 - The Andalusia, Illinois-Iowa CBC was the fifth count I compiled during the 2002/2003 CBC marathon. At 4:15 a.m., I drove to my count territory of upland forest, agricultural land, small floodplain, and riverine habitat, on one of the coldest days of the count period. After nine consecutive CBCs with substantial winds, we finally enjoyed weak winds and seasonably mild temperatures. I had a very good day, recording 61 species. Highlights for the day included a single Trumpeter Swan, 1 Long-eared Owl, Loggerhead and Northern Shrikes, 1 Hermit Thrush, 36 White-throated Sparrows, 5 White-crowned Sparrows, and 4 Eurasian Tree Sparrows.

December 27 - At 3:15 a.m., I was on my way to meet Steve Hager, who helped me with the Western Mercer County, Illinois-Iowa CBC, the sixth count for which I was a compiler. My territory in this circle is extremely habitat-rich. It contains substantial amounts of upland and bottomland forest, as well as a large stretch of the Mississippi River. Much amount of wetland habitat and

smaller areas of grassland are also present. Like virtually all CBCs in the Midwest, this count also had a significant agricultural component. For the second day in a row, the weather cooperated with seasonable temperatures and light wind. Although waterfowl were extremely scarce today, we were still able to identify 56 species. Among the more interesting finds were 115 Bald Eagles, 7 Wilson's Snipe, 2 Long-eared Owls, 6 Carolina Wrens, 1 Hermit Thrush, and 105 Cedar Waxwings as well as Song (44), Swamp (41), Eurasian Tree- (25), and Harris's (1) Sparrows and 6 Rusty Blackbirds.

December 28 - After only four hours of sleep, I left at 3:30 a.m to drive 2.5 hours to meet Weir Nelson's field party for the North Linn, Iowa CBC. Once again, we had a favorable weather forecast. This rural territory is characterized by large areas of agricultural land with relatively small scattered woodlots. Considering the fact that this CBC lacks a major water body and therefore has low waterfowl diversity, we were still able to identify 45 species. The only notable species were Long-eared Owl, Carolina and Winter Wrens, and White-throated Sparrow.

December 29 - After five hours of sleep, I headed back to the south suburbs of Chicago at 3:15 a.m. for a three-hour drive and my 15th CBC of the season in Thorn Creek, Illinois. The end of this count marked the

three-fourths completion point for this mentally and physically grueling endeavor. Although the weather was very cooperative, with unusually mild temperatures and a light wind, my results from this count were dismal (33 species). For the second time this year, my group failed to observe at least 40 species. The territory I covered at Thorn Creek was completely devoid of all habitat types except open agricultural land. In an alarming trend, these open agricultural fields are even disappearing here, being replaced by massive suburban subdivisions, which have virtually no vegetation and are largely paved. Unfortunately, within many of the count circles in which I have participated over the years, the common theme is a constant and continuing loss of natural habitat to human development – a very sad state of affairs for those of us who care about the environment. The only highlights here were a single Hermit Thrush, 4 Lapland Longspurs, and 4 Snow Buntings.

During my drive home, I was thoroughly exhausted and looking forward to having the next day off. In fact, the knowledge I would have a day off may have been my saving grace as I wondered whether those who questioned my mental stability for thinking I could complete this CBC adventure, were right.

December 30 - After 10 hours of sleep, I was rested and eager to continue the CBC marathon. I left