

home at 10:30 p.m. for a 7.5-hour drive to extreme southern Illinois for the next two days of CBCs. The first was the Mermet Lake, Illinois-Kentucky CBC. The weather forecast for the next two days in southern Illinois called for periodic heavy rains. Go figure. Two hours north of Mermet Lake, I begin to encounter heavy rain squalls and high winds. As predicted, this entire count was conducted during intermittent torrential rains (2-3 inches) along with occasional gusty winds. The temperatures however remained mild, which was nice, since I spent the whole day drenched. Pepsi and Vivarin were again on my menu for the day. The habitat in my territory consisted of scattered woodlots and considerable amounts of agriculture; however, I also had the bottomlands of Mermet Lake, as well as a stretch of the Ohio River. Once again, a fairly good diversity of waterfowl resulted in a rather successful day given the conditions (66 species). Noteworthy birds included 5 Canvasbacks, 1 Red-shouldered Hawk, 1 Thayer's Gull, 10 Carolina and 4 Winter Wrens, 3 Hermit Thrushes, 65 Field Sparrows, and 36 Eastern Meadowlarks. Additionally, we had some southern Illinois specialties like the Eastern Phoebe, Carolina Chickadee, Brown Thrasher, Northern Mockingbird, and Eastern Towhee. After the group compilation at Frank Bennett's house, I left Mermet Lake at 7 p.m. and drove 1.5 hours north to

Carbondale, Illinois, where we would meet the following morning for the next count. By 10 p.m. I was sound asleep in my hotel room. Do I know how to celebrate New Year's Eve, or what? Like I said, I really need to get a life!

**January 1** - New Year's Day. 4:15 a.m.. I joined Vicki Lang's field party for the Jackson County, Illinois CBC. There was very little wind, but precipitation was again predicted. While wandering through bottomland forest, wetlands, old fields, and agricultural land, we had a dry and successful day, recording a total of 60 species. The most notable birds included 178 Greater White-fronted Geese, 12 Red-shouldered Hawks, 306 Red-headed Woodpeckers, 19 Pileated Woodpeckers, 40 Carolina Wrens, 69 Golden-crowned Kinglets, 124 Swamp and 254 White-throated Sparrows, and 13,500 blackbird species.

Following the group compilation in Carbondale, I began the six-hour drive back to the Quad Cities at 8 p.m. The two-day trip to southern Illinois and the long drive home sapped my energy, and thoroughly convinced me that I was indeed "out of my mind" when I decided to attempt this extensive CBC marathon. However, I was only three CBCs away from successful completion of the marathon. I could almost taste it! And that's what kept me going. I had no count scheduled for January 2. Then I was to complete

the odyssey by conducting three consecutive counts to end the 2002-2003 CBC count period.

**January 3** - After catching up on sleep, I began the four-hour drive north at 3 a.m. to join Fred Leshner's field party for the Yellow River, Iowa-Wisconsin CBC. This circle is in the heart of the driftless or unglaciated area. As a consequence, our territory was habitat-rich with substantial upland forest including steep bluffs covered with dense cedar stands. We also had a fairly large amount of open agricultural fields, and somewhat limited access to the Mississippi River and its floodplain. The weather was absolutely perfect for a CBC - mild temperatures, light wind, and clear. However, avian diversity is typically low during the winter this far north. As expected, even with optimum weather conditions, our field party only observed 43 species, the most notable being 1 Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, 2 Winter Wrens, 6 Golden-crowned Kinglets, 4 Yellow-rumped Warblers, a single Hermit Thrush, and 15 Swamp and 2 White-throated Sparrows. I arrived home at 11 p.m., thoroughly exhausted. The next count was six hours away in east-central Illinois.

**January 4** - After a mere two hours of sleep, I began the four-hour drive to the Middle Fork River Valley, Illinois CBC at 3 a.m. For some reason (lack of sleep? lack of mental stability?) I found this to be one of the most difficult, and even most painful drives of the entire marathon. After three long weeks of nearly constant CBCs and very little sleep, my fatigue was overwhelming. Mike Ward and I birded a portion of the Middle Fork State Fish and Wildlife Area, which included forest, old fields, and cedar stands. As with all the other CBCs, a substantial amount of agricultural land was also present. Additionally, we covered Lake Vermilion, the only major body of water in the circle.



*Thayer's Gull photo taken in December 2003 at Montrose Harbor, Chicago, by Kanae Hirabayashi.*