



President's Message

The Illinois Spring Bird Count

Where were you on May 6, 1972? That was the first (official) Spring Bird Count here in Illinois – though a ‘trial run’ count had actually been conducted almost a year earlier, on May 8th, 1971. From that beginning, the SBC goal has been to get birders to cover every one of the 102 counties in our great state, counting the migrants and the returning resident breeding species.

Ably coordinated by Vern Kleen over a substantial chunk of those 40 plus years (THANKS, VERN!), doing the Spring Count has been a fixture in the lives of many members of the Illinois birding community. Karen and I participated in our first Count in 1976 here in DuPage County; I was the driver and Karen tallied as we wound our way through the streets of Downers Grove, eventually recording just under 800 birds of 36 different species. Our highlight was two Gray-cheeked Thrushes! Looking backward with a somewhat jaundiced eye, I wonder if they weren't (just) Swainson's.

The SBC results provide powerful statistics on population trends by species, range changes over time, and a host of other useful information on the state of the birds here in Illinois – like the impressive increase in the numbers of Cooper's Hawks as they populate the suburbs and residential areas across the state, or the explosive growth of Blue-gray Gnatcatchers (at one time a fairly rare SBC bird, especially in the northern half of Illinois, now seemingly everywhere there's suitable habitat for this diminutive woodland species). The data has also delineated the declines of three species once more common in Illinois than they are today: Ring-necked Pheasants (a victim of changes in agricultural practices, especially the elimination of hedgerows), Red-headed Woodpeckers, and Bewick's Wrens, a species disappearing from much of its range in the eastern USA.

Vern retired as statewide compiler after the 2009 SBC; Tara Beveroth, Avian Field Specialist for INHS and IOS Board member, took over for Vern in this important job, beginning in 2010. The transition has been very seamless, and the longstanding question of where and how to store the Illinois SBC database has been resolved. Implemented by Tara and her INHS colleagues, the entire database is being stored at the Midwest Avian Data Center: <http://data.prbo.org/partners/mwadc/>.

Stay tuned; complete public access to this 40+ year history is coming soon on the MADC website. And if you attended the recent Gull Frolic, you also heard from Tara about the other substantive change to the SBC. Beginning in 2013, two days in early May will be scheduled for the Count. It's always been a struggle to get coverage in all Illinois counties – the population center counties attract large numbers of birders, the rural counties get little, sometimes no coverage at all. By switching to the two day format, dedicated SBCers will have the opportunity to count in their home patch on one day, and then help count in an underbirded county the next! I can't wait!

Robert Fisher

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