

An Illinois Christmas Bird Count Odyssey

Top to Bottom and Back

by David B. Johnson

The following narrative is dedicated to Penny Pucelik who died 30 August 1994. My odyssey might never have happened had she not ignited the spirit of birding in me two decades ago. On 12 November 1972 I went on my first bird walk as a senior at Bradley University in Peoria. Pucelik, my French instructor, took me on a weekend getaway bird walk with her husband Tom at Chautauqua National Wildlife Refuge in Illinois. It was a delightful, crisp, fall day, resplendent with feathered wonders. We saw a Northern Shoveler and Snow Geese that appeared as if they had "mud slapped against the sides," as Pucelik put it. An American Kestrel perched on a wire and my first woodpecker, a downy, called as we walked the trails. I took almost the same walk on 23 December 1994, at the Chautauqua Christmas Bird Count, 23 years later. This was a special count for me, not only because of the Bald Eagles and thousands of waterfowl that clouded the skies, but also because it included many of the same birds I had seen with the Puceliks earlier. I was then reminded of the gift Penny Pucelik had given me so long ago.

As a northerner, I dreamed for years of participating in the southern Illinois Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs) where the possibility existed of recording 100 species or more in one count circle and where many more individuals as well as species are seen than where I usually

count in Lake County. Vernon Kleen of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources had been bugging me for years to join in one of the southern counts. I decided 1994 was going to be the year to do it. I was going to help with the Horseshoe Lake, the state's southernmost count, Cypress Creek, and then Union County CBCs in extreme southern Illinois.

With new binoculars and a desire to participate in as many Illinois CBCs as I could, I planned an itinerary that would take me from the Chicago area through central Illinois and back to northern Illinois during the two week Christmas count period (17 Dec 1994 - 2 Jan 1995). I arranged to join in Denis Kania's Fermilab-Batavia count in DuPage County; Myrna Deaton's count at Clinton Lake in DeWitt County; the BIG THREE, Horseshoe, Cypress Creek, and Union County in southern Illinois; the Evanston count; Joel Greenberg's Chicago lakefront and Waukegan counts; and, finally, I had learned that there was a Chautauqua NWR count in central Illinois that I could join on my way back from southern Illinois if Sig Bjorklund and Dave Bohlen agreed, which they did. I was excited about participating in this great birding year-end tradition - a social and scientific event. I was going to have fun top-to-bottom birding in Illinois and hopefully set a new record of nine CBCs in one year. What follows is a personal account of my 1994 CBC odyssey.



David B. Johnson traveled the length and width of Illinois to participate in nine Christmas Bird Counts the winter of 1994/95. Here he is shown birding Union County in southern Illinois. Photo by Robert Chapel.

Fermilab-Batavia.

17 December. 9 a.m. I met my long time birding friend Joe Suchecki of Naperville at Pratt-Wayne Woods and Prairie Preserve. My first CBC bird was a Red-tailed Hawk, a lone sentinel on a snow-covered field. As I pulled up to meet Suchecki, he exclaimed he had already seen an exciting bird, a Lincoln's Sparrow along an open creek. This great find required a meticulously detailed description. We walked several open fields with diminishing snow cover finding several Eastern Meadowlarks and Swamp Sparrows as well as a Ring-necked Pheasant and watching Horned Larks flying overhead. At noon we heard a Snow Bunting. We also saw a single Yellow-rumped Warbler feeding on poison ivy berries before leaving to fly south.

The afternoon was spent drive-birding around the DuPage County Airport. This was pretty good "turf"; we discovered a Brown Thrasher

Meadowlark