

"Those are male Brewer's Blackbirds in breeding plumage!" We studied these birds while they remained in a farmer's cow lot yard for at least 45 minutes. We recorded the greenish sheen to the black plumage, razor-straight culmen on the bill, and rather short, squared tail.

Just north of this farmer's woodlot, wisps of snow began swirling over the dark and stubble cornfields as many Horned Larks and several Lapland Longspurs called overhead. We had to wait at one point for a large group of cattle to cross the road. At noon we reconnoitered at the Visitor's Center where we learned of some rather good bird sightings by other parties including another male Brewer's Blackbird seen by Myrna Deaton, a Northern Saw-whet Owl recorded by Steve Bailey and company, Northern and Loggerhead Shrike, plus many water birds.

Since no Brown Creepers had yet been recorded, finding one became our afternoon mission. Off we went to the north valley where we found two creepers as well as a Sharp-shinned Hawk darting through a small river's edge, scattering all the birds. At the prairie point we pished five Swamp Sparrows along the lake's grassy wet eastern edge. Across the lake we spotted Green-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, and Mallards. But the real thrill was hearing a Wild Turkey gobbling across the valley. At the evening's tally, each team had their own feathered trophies to contribute to the pot of 88 species. Counters also mused about whether hiking a few more miles would have produced the elusive Red-shouldered Hawk or the winter finches that were missing from the count.

Horseshoe Lake.

20 December. I picked up Myrna Deaton around noon 19 December to make a leisurely journey to Horseshoe Lake Conservation Area in Alexander County, seven miles north of Cairo. You know you're headed south when Turkey Vultures and an occasional Black Vulture are soaring

overhead and as Loggerhead Shrikes dot the telephone wires and barbed-wire fences along the way. Horseshoe Lake is the state's southernmost count and observers have almost always recorded 90 species or more, though falling short of the magic 100 mark. As Mike Donahue said, "It's one of those 98s," meaning this count had the dubious distinction of being one of the "BIG THREE" which have recorded 98 species but no more.

The 2,400-acre shallow lake provides a wintering ground for not only thousands of Canada Geese but also many other wintering birds. As we entered the refuge at sunset Monday, a gorgeous Bald Eagle, whistling Wood Ducks, and a cacophony of geese greeted us along the oxbow lake with a bayouesque backdrop of bald cypress, swamp cottonwood, and tupelo gum. The Miller City Blacktop soon brought us to the turnoff to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources' Wicker Club lodge. Now I was about 340 miles south from home and my count circle in northeastern Illinois. Mike Donahue rates the Wicker Club a "modest and rustic A" for its comfortable lodging and rather modern kitchen and bath facilities. I couldn't argue with his assessment.

The next day, Deaton and I set off on our assigned area, the refuge nature preserve loop around the lodge's campground and some driving routes south of the refuge along the Mississippi River. The morning brought "tea-kettle, tea-kettles" of Carolina Wrens and the "old Sam Peabody" songs of White-throated Sparrows, plus Eastern Bluebirds and Fox Sparrows. In the wood and field edges south of the Wicker Club were scores of Song and Swamp Sparrows, lesser numbers of Field and Savannah Sparrows, and a solitary Lincoln's Sparrow spotted by Deaton. Rufous-sided Towhees, Brown Thrashers, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, and one House Wren darted about in the hedges. In the wetter, flat fields, we saw Killdeer almost everywhere as well as an occasional Common Snipe. Lapland Longspurs and

Horned Larks often called above. The air was balmy and crisp and while the deciduous trees were bare, we felt as if it were the Spring Bird Count, not the CBC.

In the afternoon we spotted 11 species of ducks, including Canvasback and Northern Pintail in the Grand Lake area, and in the evening we observed several cormorants and Ring-billed Gulls at a new levee retention area near Willard. The Wicker Club countdown party brought the usual "oohs and ahs" as Vernon Kleen and H. David Bohlen recorded the first Ross' Goose, two immature female Indigo Buntings out on Horseshoe Lake Island in some fallow milo fields, and two Common Yellowthroats.

Cypress Creek.

21 December. During the evening a spring-like thunderstorm dropped in and when we awoke at 4:30 a.m. to drive to the Cypress Creek NWR center at Shawnee Community College, we wondered if the rain would quit. It did. Myrna Deaton and I got our assignments from Todd Fink and Judy DeNeal and headed out the Belknap Blacktop to check on a Black Vulture roost. There were no Black Vultures on the high power lines but a Rough-legged Hawk sailed over the Indian Point Bluff in Johnson County. (I felt at home in Johnson County.) We enjoyed a soaring Turkey Vulture and Northern Harrier. After recording several Yellow-rumped Warblers eating poison ivy berries near Karnak we explored some southern fields which brought a pocket of 15 Savannah Sparrows, easily 15 times as many as I've ever seen on a northern Illinois count, and a group of about 10 singing White-crowned Sparrows on a brushy fence row. We recorded 106 of this species that day. Most were singing. Late evening brought us into Karnak where we observed the count's only Hooded Mergansers in a pond adjacent to a dike levee.

This count's countdown party was held at Shawnee Community College. Scott Robinson and his field

Meadowlark