



Beating the all-time CBC high count

by Kelly J. McKay

Some of you may have read one of the articles published last year in which I described the adventure of doing a 20-count marathon (See *Meadowlark* 12:89-92 and 127-131, A Christmas Bird Count marathon: parts 1 and 2). If so, you will recall that I planned to attempt to complete a full 23-count marathon during the 2003-2004 CBC season. To avoid the logistics problems encountered last year, I began planning and contacting count compilers throughout a six-state region of the Midwest by early November 2003. After six weeks and seemingly unending hours of telephone and e-mail conversations, not to mention considerable shifting in the scheduling of the seven counts I compile, I was finally able to successfully schedule 23 CBCs. I also decided to increase this year's challenge by seeing how long I could go without sleep. However, I did not want to negatively impact the counts so I asked all field parties to let me know if I seemed to be making mistakes or missing birds. If so, I would certainly start sleeping so as not to jeopardize the integrity of the count. For those wondering if they should attempt this feat, be aware that I ordinarily only sleep about five hours a night, so I believed this additional challenge to be achievable.

14 December (Davenport, Iowa-Illinois)

I began this initial CBC at 3 a.m. near my home, joined by two 15-year old first time Christmas counters, Mike Warren and Peter Woo. The temperature ranged from the mid 20s to the low 30s, and there was little or no wind. We had an extremely good day, marked by an impressive diversity of 13 waterfowl species. My group identified 64 species and 13,274 individuals. Highlights for the day included 3 Common Redpolls, 2 White-winged Scoters, and 1 each of Greater Scaup and Thayer's Gull. Several common woodland species seemed to be less abundant than usual. By the end of the count, I had been awake for 40 hours.

15 December (Lost Nation, Iowa)

I departed for this count, requiring an 88-mile round trip, at 3:15 a.m. The temperatures were similar to yesterday, but the wind was much stronger and biting making counting difficult for my field partner, Ryan Schmitz and me. Although heavy ice cover on the Wapsipinicon River made waterfowl numbers low, we still had an outstanding day, recording 50 species and 1,645 individual birds. Notable species included 2 Hermit Thrushes and a single Winter Wren. As I returned home, I felt energized. That changed when I received a message that the next

day's count, scheduled for Bridgeport, Wisconsin, had been postponed due to a winter storm predicted for the southern portion of the state. My CBC marathon attempt was in serious jeopardy only three days into the count period. I frantically jumped on the Internet and searched for a replacement count. I finally found one in Jamaica! Unfortunately this Jamaica is in central Iowa.

16 December (Jamaica, Iowa)

I left at 3:15 a.m. for a roundtrip of 450 miles. Half way there, I encountered the predicted winter storm. Snow and ice squalls left Interstate 80 ice covered and extremely treacherous. To make matters worse, sustained winds of 40 mph, which continued all day, left many of the roadways drifted over with snow and impassable. The temperature, which never escaped the mid 20s, made for severe wind chills. I spent the day working with Ray Cummins and Tom Johnson. Despite high winds, our group did have a good day observing 49 species and 18,097 individuals, 15,000 of which were Canada Geese. Other noteworthy birds included a single Northern Goshawk, 92 Ring-necked Pheasants, and 3 Western Meadowlarks. By the way, southern Wisconsin, where I was originally going to count, received less than an inch of snow that day, once again proving weather can be as unpredictable as birds.