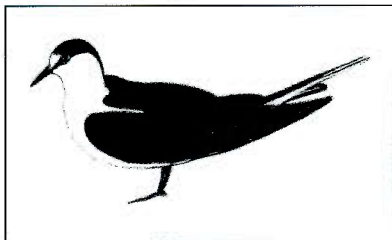


ficult at long range but straightforward when birds are perched and at close range. Sexes are alike and there is no marked seasonal variation. Juveniles and first summer types can be separated from adults. Seven subspecies are listed, none of which are separable at sea (Harrison 1985).

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# A Christmas Bird Count marathon: part I

by Kelly J. McKay

The Christmas Bird Count (CBC), sponsored by the National Audubon Society (NAS), provides some of the few truly long-term data used to document avian population trends. Additionally, with the large number of counts conducted across North America each year, the CBC Program also provides avian population data from a large geographic area. This combination of long-term and large-scale data makes the CBC Program an important source of information for the scientific monitoring of avian populations (Arbib 1981; Bock and Root 1981; Drennan 1981; Root 1988; Bibby et al. 1992). Participation in this program is certainly one of the best ways for citizens to contribute to scientific research, and thereby help monitor the health of our avian communities.

I have been participating on CBCs for over two decades. For many years, I have taken my passion and enthusiasm for CBCs to an extreme, by doing eight-to-eleven counts per year and serving as the compiler for seven of these since 1997. During the fall of 2002, I decided to take my CBC participation to the next level – the challenge of doing a “CBC marathon.” As I discussed my goal of doing 23 CBCs in a single season (one every day during the count period), with fellow birders and biologists, I was met with the same reoccurring responses: Are you insane? It can't be done. It's logistically and physically impossible.

The most number of CBCs ever done was 16!

Next, I told them that I not only wanted to do 23 counts, but I was also going to compile my usual seven counts. Regardless of references to my sanity or lack thereof, I remained undaunted. It also helped that Chan

Robbins and Paul Sykes (two of the most prolific Christmas counters ever) encouraged my endeavor at the North American Ornithological Conference in late September. The decision was made – I would attempt to do 23 CBCs in a single count season!

For the next few months, I sent e-mails and called many count compilers throughout Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Missouri, and Wisconsin trying to schedule a CBC for each day. I limited myself to these Midwestern states because of the driving distances involved. Unfortunately, I was only able to schedule 20 CBCs because of logistics (18 NAS counts and 2 state-only counts). The only days I had no CBC scheduled during the count period were 24 and 30 December 2002 and 2 January 2003.

**December 14.** The 2002-2003 CBC count period began, and I must admit my sleep was restless, anticipating the odyssey I would soon undertake. At 4 a.m., with heavy fog rolling in, I drove 1.5 hours to the Cedar Rapids, Iowa count. During the morning, I counted alone in heavy fog. My territory included upland and floodplain woodlots, a large stretch of the Cedar River, and extensive agricultural land. Unfortunately, this particular count circle continues to lose considerable amounts of habitat to development and the urban sprawl of Cedar Rapids. The morning fog made the birding difficult. The only noteworthy birds were several Hooded Mergansers, Killdeer, and Belted Kingfishers on the river, along with a small flock of Rusty Blackbirds out in ag country.

By early afternoon, the fog cleared and it was sunny and warm with little wind. I joined Weir Nelson's field party for the afternoon. We