

WERE THERE REALLY 16,463 COMMON EIDERS OUT THERE?

by David E. Clapp

EDITOR'S NOTE: The question above and the answer printed below are taken from a letter to the editor written in response to a query posed by Jodi Adams of Jefferson ("How Do You Count?" in Bird Observer, August 1988, 16:217). The letter, dated September 12, 1988, was from David E. Clapp of Marshfield, director of the South Shore Regional Center of the Massachusetts Audubon Society.

I knew it would happen. Someday someone was going to ask [that question]. The Marshfield Christmas Bird Count (CBC) has long allowed me to greet the sun at the bend in the Duxbury Beach sandspit known as the Gurnet. From this vantage point I have been able to watch (and, yes, count) Common Eiders returning to the shallow bays from their night of communal bobbing somewhere on Cape Cod Bay.

Before I explain about the counting, let me offer a few tidbits that may be helpful or essential to the stationary birder in winter. For example, it is easy to lose friends on a fourteen-hour-long winter birding trip, but when you must sit still, exposed to wind and weather, for even a two-hour vigil, it is almost a sure thing that your relationship with any companion who is not a fully consenting individual will never be the same again. It is important that anyone you invite along be interested, willing, and fully prepared for the long cold adventure. It is much colder sitting than walking, and it is invariably much less comfortable. Good partners are very helpful for the psychological well-being of everyone involved. They are also essential for an accurate count and as a source of additional food. Gilda Santoro has been my companion at the aforementioned counts for several years (about half the time as Gilda Cross). The counts have always been fun for Gilda and me, and that makes the weather and bodily discomforts bearable.

Sitting on a cement buttress, a sloping revetment, or a patch of frozen ground can become almost instantly a pain in the butt. For several years I winced and bore it, but now I have a solution. You know those funny little foam bits that cushion delicate packages, spill all over the floor, and then evade any efforts to sweep them up? Well, when those things are put in a stuff sack or other rip-proof bag, they become a comfortable and wonderfully insulating seat.

Food is essential to winter bird-counting. Hot drinks are fun, but most don't stay with you very long and require awkward maneuvering within an hour after imbibing. The clothing necessary for winter birding on a bluff by the ocean is such that drinking lots of tea or coffee is really not worth the exercise. Ten years ago I carried a bag of peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches and just ate all day

long. Now, my taste is more haute cuisine, and I carry several kinds of sandwiches and fruit as well as a variety of drinks. Most Christmas counts do not stop for a sit-down lunch, and thoughtful food preparation the day before can keep you alive while you travel around the countryside counting birds.

And now for the bird-counting issue. Jodi Adams of Jefferson asked in the last issue, "How are very large flocks of birds counted or estimated?" In my example (counting eider for the Marshfield CBC), we make ourselves comfortable and then locate buoys on the water. As the horizon opens up, we begin to see small flocks of eider flying in from the open ocean, passing in front of us. As they pass the buoys, we count them one by one and then note the total on a pad of paper. This is easy enough with flocks of twenty to seventy. Once the flight increases, we split the counting line in half. I count from the buoy out, and Gilda counts from the buoy in. We usually see well over one hundred flocks of fifty or so. This gives us a good handle on what a flock of fifty looks like, and we can often guess how many there are before counting. It becomes more hectic as time passes, but our skills become honed as well.

There are often flights of over a thousand at a time. But when seen from a good vantage point, there is plenty of time to estimate the birds that pass by. On occasions like this, we will count by tens in order to determine the size of a flock. As the flight slows down, we resume the easier pace of dawn. After each flight passes by, we write down the number of individuals in the group. After a while, some of the birds below us will begin to mill around and occasionally pass out of the bay to head north along the coast. At that point we decide that enough is enough, and we count no more eider that day.

With eider the most difficult situation is found when the birds decide to swim into the bay rather than fly in. The flocks on the water are often very dense and long. When the birds are concentrated this way, it is more difficult for the counter. But again, the movement past a buoy is the best way to make a good count.

The most important part of counting is to make sure that you record your numbers as you proceed. Trying to remember is never adequate. At the end of the counting period we often have a hundred numbers scrawled on the page to be tallied. There is no substitute for this type of record keeping. We also note the mergansers, cormorants, oldsquaws, scoters, and the occasional King Eider. At the Daniel Webster Wildlife Sanctuary in Marshfield, David Ludlow and I have counted flights of American Robins going to roost. We use a stone to designate each one hundred birds. As darkness and mosquitoes end our ability to concentrate on the task at hand, we count up our stones and head for shelter. Somehow this seems appropriate for modest numbers (we had 1515 robins) but would require a lot of advance rock collecting for the eider flight.

Counting is an interesting exercise. Next time you go out with some friends for a day of birding, each of you might keep an accurate count of a fairly common bird without telling your companions what species you are watching. Blue Jays, Ring-billed Gulls, and Song Sparrows are good examples of birds we see often and fail to record mentally. "How many ringers do you think we've seen today?" will often elicit a wide range of responses from your companions. As far as numbers go, I have little faith in the numbers provided by those folks who sit down in front of a fireplace to determine how many individuals were seen during a day. "Numbers seen" can be used to help determine times of passage or to aid in establishing migration routes, and they may be most important in identifying (and hence, preserving) valuable habitat.

In summary--yes, you do count one at a time as fast as you can. After that, to count large flocks, you use the smallest unit of birds possible. Real challenges occur at sites like the Fore River Bridge in Quincy as the starlings come in to roost at dusk or in counting the huge eider flocks off the coast of Chatham from an airplane.

NEWS NOTE: GONE BIRDING! Several local birders have been involved in the production of a videotape VCR game. The idea was conceived by Oliver Komar, a well-known young birder from Newton, and Alf Wilson of Walpole, who discovered the Henslow's Sparrow on the 1981 Greater Boston CBC. Together they founded Rupicola Productions, Inc., which is producing *Gone Birding!* The two-hour video is cohosted by Peter Alden, author and birding tour leader, and Bill Oddie, British birder and humorous writer. Peter also contributed to the design of the game board, which is a detailed map of North America with its biomes and over a hundred top birding hot spots, and wrote the detailed information found on each of the game's hotspot cards. Richard Forster helped the producers select the nearly one thousand cuts of bird footage that encompasses over 350 North American species, and Wayne Petersen and other local birders helped review and test the game. Connecticut Artist Julie Zickefoose, an active birder in the area during her days at Harvard's MCZ, has produced extensive artwork for the project, including an original portrait of A Greater Prairie Chicken. The video is introduced by actress Jane Alexander and is scheduled to enter the market in early November.