

Sibley Birding: How Much Does Your Big Day Weigh? Or, Birding With a Calculator

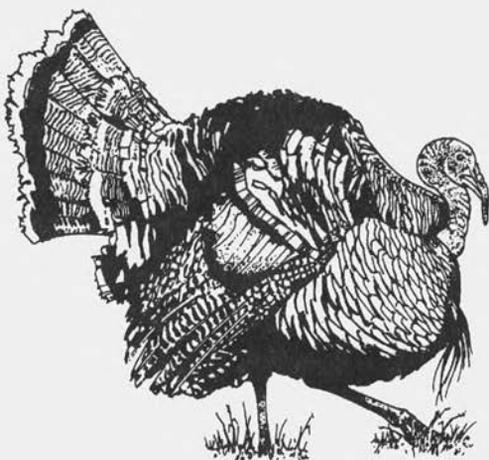
Bob Bushnell and Steve Davis

With the publication of *The Sibley Guide to Birds* and its rapid ascendancy to status as the premiere birding book, we figured that its new approach — its concern with the weight of birds or avimass — would set a standard for whole new variations on the hobby of listing and add nuances never before entertained. For example, spring migration may not be the best time to do your listing. In southern New England, November might be prime birding season, just as it is deer-hunting season, and for the same reason: that's when the species' masses are at their greatest. Also, with the arrival of the larger winter birds — ducks and geese and even the winter cormorants (Greats), there is a distinct increase in average mass-per-bird seen. You can forget about your warblers (10-20 grams), kinglets (6 grams), and other miniscule songbirds; give us a Canada Goose (4500 g), or Mute Swan (10,000 g), or even a Common Eider (2150 g).

Avimass birding also is a great leveler for beginning birders: obviously, larger birds in general are easier to find and to identify than are smaller birds. Even a novice is unlikely to miss or misidentify an Andean Condor (if in the right habitat; yes, avimassing can be done outside the ABA area) or White Pelican (7500 g). One good Wild Turkey (7400 g) easily spotted by a beginner will more than make up for dozens of songbird species carefully located and identified by expert birders.

Listing birds in order by weight will benefit beginning birders as well, as species are much easier to find than when the A.O.U. taxonomic order is used. The latter is relatively incomprehensible for a beginner; the former, common sense.

Early mornings are not particularly necessary for finding heavy birds, unless you are going for Great Horned Owls (1400 g), so beginning birders, especially children, do not have to get out of bed before the crack of dawn to be competitive. Even so, an extra Canada Goose will compensate for three Great Horneds, more than which you are not likely to find anyway. However, as the new jargon for avimass birding develops, time may become a factor: "A Ton by Ten" we realized was much too generous,



as we identified more than a ton of Mute Swans at our second stop on our annual November Big Day. We could easily visualize "A Ton by Sun (set/rise)" becoming catchwords.

Avimass birding adds a new parameter that amateur birders can use to contribute to the ornithological literature. The Christmas Bird Count effort that has defined so well for so long the status of resident and winter birds in North America and elsewhere can now have a new dimension. The avimass of each count can be calculated retrospectively as well (*Swansea Journal* 2001). There may be significant ecological and environmental insights and knowledge to be gained by considering where the bird mass is and how it is changing. In the southeastern Rhode Island area, for example, the avimass has become dominated over the past decade by Canada Geese and Mute Swans.

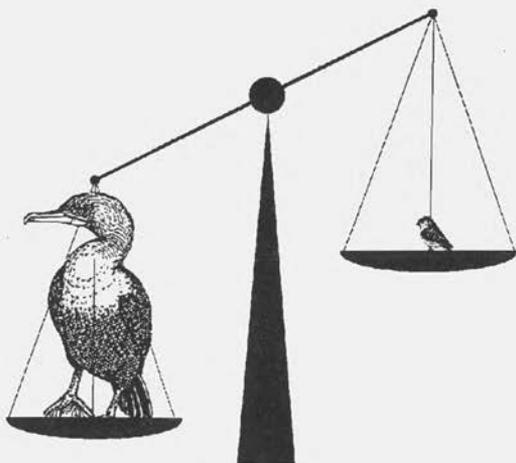
Consequently, as we conducted our Big Day, we not only counted species and number of each species, but we also calculated the mass of the avifauna identified. Although our 2001 count was abbreviated and did not approach the species count for the RI November record of 85, it clearly established a new standard for November avimass, coincidentally at almost exactly 10,000 kilograms, with Canada Geese accounting for 54 percent of the total. 

References

Sibley, D.A. 2000. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

How Much Does Your Christmas Bird Count Weigh? *Swansea Journal of Art, Science, and Imagination*, No. 13, Autumn, 2001, pp. 103-105.

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