

Imagine 40,000-plus volunteers combing hill, dale, and dump

Twenty-six owls, five species. That's what 17-year-old Marshall Iliff of Annapolis, Maryland, got for Christmas. Or, rather, the 1992 National Audubon Society-Leica Christmas Bird Count.

Iliff and partner Hank Taliaferro heard one Barn Owl, and saw Eastern Screech-Owls and Barred, Great Horned, and Short-eared owls as they prowled the territory in two counts in Maryland.

"I just love it, every aspect—the challenge to identify the hard-to-identify birds like flycatchers and gulls, and the challenge to find something unusual," says Iliff of his fifth

Some, like Chandler Robbins, who did his first count at age 11 in 1934 in Massachusetts, go on to careers in ornithology or conservation. Robbins is a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Maryland. He comes from a birding family; his parents participated in some of the earliest counts.

This past season, Robbins took part in five counts, down from his high of 12 in 1977. But he can enthusiastically recall details from almost every count he's done, describing in vivid detail the Ovenbird he spotted at his feeder one year, for example. And he can comment on

BIRDERS *of* WINTER

year as a Christmas bird count (CBC) participant. He is only slightly disappointed that he didn't find a Northern Saw-whet Owl; the two counts he joined this year didn't have quite the right habitat for the difficult-to-spot bird.

Iliff's words echo generations of Christmas count participants in the United States, Canada, Latin America, and other spots around the globe. In 1992, more than 40,000 joined to take part in the world's oldest and most extensive wildlife survey, which first took place in 1900.

The count has important scientific merit as birders census species in areas as diverse as bitterly cold Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, (one species in 1991, the Common Raven) and tropically diverse Atlantic Canal Area, Panama (350 species). As the longest-running avian data set, it is a gold mine of information for biologists, graduate students, and conservationists seeking to assess environmental changes.

But the real success of the CBC lies not simply in its value as a tool for science, but in the fact that it relies on a broad mix of people to carry it out. Anytime a community or cause can muster the numbers of volunteers seen in this international event, it can play an important role in educating the public at large. And the count often spurs people to further appreciate and protect birdlife.

changes he's seen in over half a century: In 1992, Robbins was disappointed that no Purple Finches were found on his Maryland counts, and that warm weather meant fewer duck species in the ponds he surveyed.

Across the continent on the Oregon coast, high school students Rowan and Rainy Lehrman hoped they didn't make any mistakes as they madly flipped through their field guide this past December, during what is becoming their annual 24-hour foray into the world of birding.

In 1991, Rowan Lehrman's government teacher approached the 17-year-old from Neskowin, Ore., with an extra-credit project: Organize the town's first Christmas bird count. "I like science, and I like nature, but I'm not a person who knows a lot about birds," says Lehrman.

Nor had she ever tried to organize a community event. But she put up posters, got the local newspaper to run an announcement, and twisted the arms of her friends and family. Twenty people showed up, including a few experienced birders, and they documented hundreds of birds. "People thought it was a fun thing," she recalls.

For 1992, Rowan's younger sister, Rainy, took charge. She started earlier recruiting volunteers for the Dec. 19 count. She even got another high school from Salem inter-

in the world's oldest wildlife survey. By Elizabeth Pennisi

ested. The Saturday count was on a gray, wet day.

"It was really miserable," says Rowan. "But somebody had to go out." The Lehrmans and a few other hardy souls braved the freezing rain and were rewarded with the sighting of several Peregrine Falcons, says Rowan, who adds that she intends to do it again next year.

The Christmas bird count may be the most catholic naturalist event.

"You can be anything from the ultimate expert to a rank beginner," says Paul Lehman, who runs the Santa Barbara, California, survey. Each participant acquires a storehouse of memories about extraordinary adventures and unusual sightings, as well as a few frustrations. But, as the growing numbers of participants indicate, those frustrations pale in comparison to the enjoyment.



Karl Maslowski, age 79, has watched winter birds in Cincinnati, Ohio, since he was 15. "I keep going because I'm curious to know what's around," says this retired wildlife photographer. "I also enjoy the companionship."

Phyllis Jones went on her third Christmas count on December 26. Last year she went away for the day, but came back in time for the dinner and tallying of species.

"I realized I missed doing the count, so this year I worked my schedule around to make sure I took part," says Jones, who edits the newsletter for the Sullivan County Audubon Society in New York.

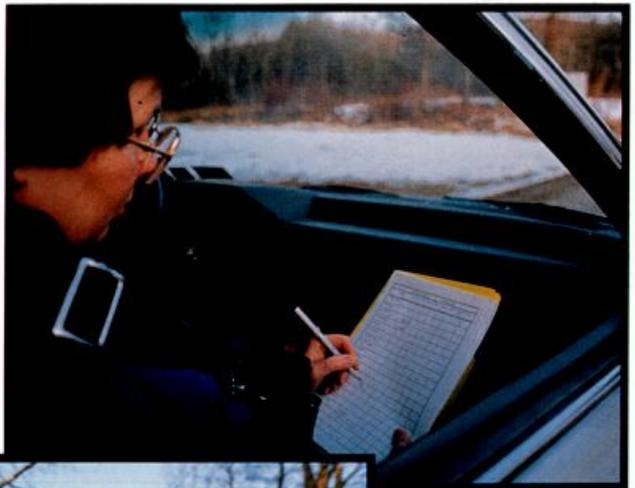
Jay Sheppard, a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, started at age 13, and in the next four decades completed as many as eight counts in a single season, for a total exceeding 200. In his younger days, he would travel 1200 miles through California in one count period.

Now in his eighties, Ben Coffey Jr. still attends the Memphis count that he started in 1928. Originally it was a solo effort. Then he was joined by several Boy Scouts, and later his wife, Lula, and several dozen others. Coffey has

made 230 or so counts in all, and his wife has logged 190. Coffey has kept up this Christmas tradition, even while on military tour in India.

"The Christmas count is just something that's as real and important to us as Santa Claus is to young children," says Lula Coffey.

A Holiday Ritual The tradition began quite modestly in 1900 when 27 birdwatchers turned out Christmas day to



Phyllis Jones took part in the 1992 Sullivan County count in New York. Her sector included the town of Wurtsboro and nearby woodlands. Jones and partner Arlene Borko tallied 26 bird species.

protest the "side hunt," an annual ritual in which hunters competed to see who could shoot the most wild birds and mammals that afternoon. Frank M. Chapman, an ornithologist at the American Mu-

seum of Natural History, was editing the Audubon Society's publication *Bird-Lore* and wrote an editorial proposing a count instead of a shoot.

He published the results two months later, with the hunch that people would begin to appreciate which birds were around Christmas day and just how many birds one could see in a few hours. Then, as now, the survey was comprehensive: The 27 birders did their counting in Pacific Grove, California; Oberlin, Ohio; Central Park in New York City; Baldwin, Louisiana; and Belmont, Massachusetts, among other places. The participants came up with 5000 birds, including flickers, woodpeckers, juncos, and hawks.

Chapman's hunch was right. At the turn of the century, few people called themselves birdwatchers. But the idea caught the public's imagination. And in the next 30 years, better binoculars and bird guides opened the way for ama-

teurs to make great strides in sighting and identifying birds, even in winter. What they saw amazed them.

"No birdwatcher had any inkling how many birds there were at Christmas time," recalls Stuart Houston, a former hunter, who organized a 1941 count in his home territory of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, in Canada. In 1941, Houston, then 15, and a few friends had just started the count when a blizzard drove them indoors. They found only eight species that day. But in years to follow they were pleasantly surprised to find that they could spot up to 50 different species, even in their cold, short day. "We never expected that we would find even 20 [species]," he says.

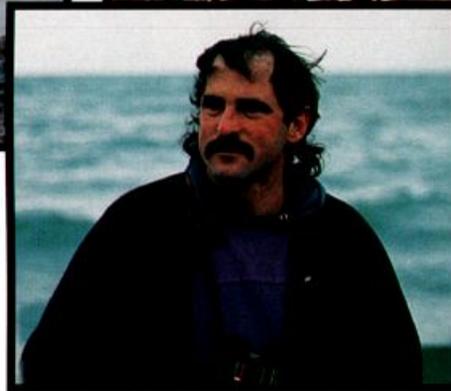
Lifers There are legends on the Christmas count circuit, though no one article could ever begin to give credit to all of the heroes. During many decades of birding, these individuals have inspired countless others to follow their lead.

When Charles H. Rogers died in 1977 in his late eight-



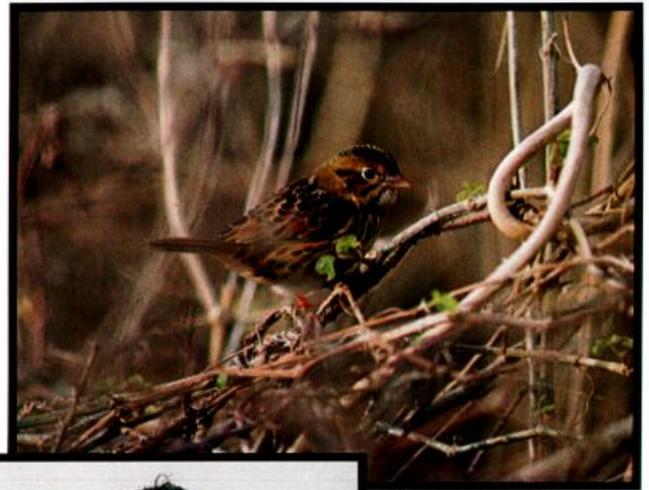
ies, he held the record for the most consecutive years of counts, 69. Actually, Rogers did counts for 77 years total; he missed 1968, but went on to do eight more. Rogers joined the first count in 1900

Peter Pyle, right, has been doing Christmas bird counts nearly all his life. Above, a Purple Sandpiper (left) and Henslow's Sparrow (right) have been good finds on the Freeport, Texas, count.



Many others have helped spread the word for this birding event. Madison, Wisconsin, clergyman Samuel D. Robbins has been a missionary for the Christmas count, starting 19 of the 25 counts in his state. Van Remsen of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, has earned the respect of his birding peers; in addition to compiling seven CBCs in four states, he works hard recruiting participants for Oakland, California; Corpus Christi, Texas; and Sabine, Louisiana, making those counts serious challengers for state and national CBC records.

Peter Pyle, 35, does not remember his first count. When he was 6-months-old, he accompanied his parents as an



official, fee-paying participant in Seattle. The next year the toddler walked through his Washington, D.C., neighborhood with his mom, and the following year, he sat in his car seat while his father drove around Fort

Belvoir, Virginia. From 1966 through 1968, Pyle did his CBCs in Honolulu, then returned to the east coast, where he began crowding in several counts in each season. Now he does counts in northern California, where he studies landbird migration (and great white sharks) as a biologist at the Point Reyes Bird Observatory. Pyle's dad, Robert, still works the Christmas bird counts in Hawaii.

Penchant for Organization Victor Emanuel, now of Austin, Texas, did his first count at age 10 with an outdoor club in Houston. He still remembers how impressed he was when he sighted his first Vermilion Flycatcher, and later spotted thousands of ducks that had sought refuge on the undeveloped land surrounding an old ordnance factory. "Birds were beautiful from the first time I remember looking at them," says Emanuel, founder of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc.

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Six years after his first count, he organized a different count on his own in Freeport, Texas. Having a penchant for organization and knowing that this spot, with its mix of habitats, location, and relatively mild climate, would make a prime place for lots of birds, Emanuel aimed to develop the count into one of the most successful in North America. He recruited experts from Houston—and then from all of Texas—exhorting them to make the state number one again. It had led the country in species sighted in the 1950s, but then dropped behind California and Florida.

Emanuel spread his call to other parts of the country. As a result, the Freeport count has included such luminaries as neotropical bird expert Ted Parker, renowned for his ability to identify bird songs, and the late Joseph Taylor, president of the American Birding Association from 1979-1983 and president of the Hawk Mountain Sanctuary Association.

“We’ve been number one for eight of the last 10 years,” says Emanuel.

The Freeport count also illustrates how the event can make a difference in a community. Emanuel says the environmental awareness of Dow Chemical Company, which moved into the Freeport area about the same time the count started there, has grown. The company has always allowed the birders to carry out the count on Dow Chemical property, and even hosts a dinner afterwards. Now a strong local contingent participates in the count, and certain key natural areas have been preserved, says Emanuel.

Late-Bloomers Not all Christmas count volunteers begin as teens. Claudia Wilds, author of *Finding Birds in the National Capital Area*, could hardly tell birds apart 20 years ago. Like many people, she had pegged birdwatchers as peculiar people, never without their binoculars, caught up in the pursuit of winged quarry. She had bought a field guide, but was not able to identify anything, at first.

Wilds began to warm up to the idea, however, after a trip to Florida, where she saw lots of large birds that even she could pick out. Then in 1970, she went to the Outer Banks in North Carolina with a friend. There were lots of birds on the mud flats. Wilds happened to have her field guide and binoculars, and something clicked.

“I said, ‘I’m not leaving here until I find out what all these things are.’” And she did. “It was such a high. It was like an epiphany; it was like being reborn,” she recalls.

Not that the transition from novice to expert is easy.

“I slammed the car door; I drove too fast,” recalls Marge Brown, who didn’t start looking at birds until she and her husband retired to Summerland Key, Florida, 15 years ago. “It’s taken years to do it right.”

Best Birds, Biggest Counts The competitive spirit inspires CBC participants to strive each year to beat their own records, as well as records held by other counts. People in hot spots like Freeport and Santa Barbara in California go to great lengths to stay at the top of the list in number of species. Over the years, for example, more and more counters have extended their hours to predawn in order to hear owls, thus boosting their totals.

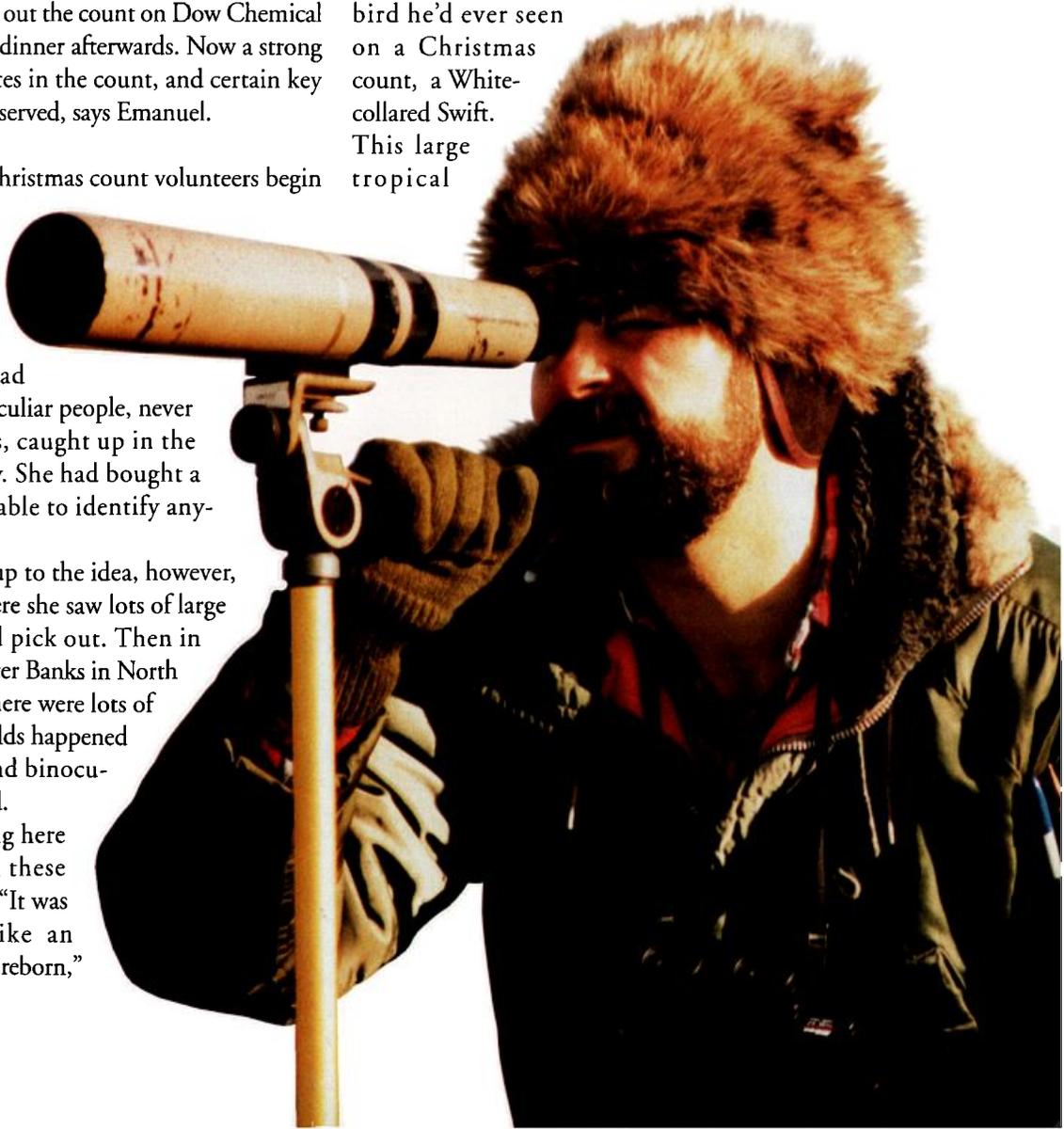
But the competitive aspect is not the most important, even to these gung-ho birders.

“What’s really exciting is that you never know what will turn up,” says Victor Emanuel. The evening get-together after the count is a little like Christmas morning—but instead of gift-wrapped surprises, there’s unusual sightings to revel over.

About five years ago, Jim Morgan came in from the Freeport count ecstatic at what he called the most unusual bird he’d ever seen

on a Christmas count, a White-collared Swift.

This large tropical



denizen nests behind waterfalls in Mexico and the Caribbean. Only five had even been recorded in the United States before.

Emanuel proudly recalls how in the few minutes that the bird flew across the Freeport count area, three groups spotted it and one even chased it in a car long enough to get decent photographs.

In Santa Barbara, California, folks were ecstatic when a Hepatic Tanager showed up in one of their local parks nine years ago. It liked the California climate so much that it started coming back year after year. "It gives you an idea about how long these birds live," says Paul Lehman. He cites another example: An Eurasian Green-Winged Teal from Siberia that for more than a decade wintered in a local pond.

Of course, the birds don't always cooperate.

"Sometimes you waste almost a whole day on just one species," says Lehman. In 1989, one Santa Barbara couple had spotted a Black-headed Grosbeak at their feeder. It showed up every day for a month. On the day of the count the couple took turns keeping watch for the bird, which rarely winters in California. It didn't show up—until dawn the next morning, too late to be included on the count.

But rare birds are "sort of the cherry on top of the ice cream on top of the piece of cake," explains biologist Jay Sheppard.

Even without unusual birds, "there's a scientific value to the count, as well as an educational value. It helps get new people into monitoring the environment."

Counting for Conservation Sheppard points out that the annual event represents a scientific windfall for biologists and wildlife scientists. Those cold toes and worn binoculars have helped build a database of more than a billion entries. It includes more than 1000 species of birds sighted in the Western Hemisphere. About 200 scientific papers, half of which were published in refereed journals, have relied on count data.

One of the first was by University of Colorado biology professor Carl E. Bock, who used the data to investigate the ecology of acorn-eating woodpeckers. Based on that work, he decided that there was a lot of useful information buried in the bird counts, and that a computer would be the best way to sift through the data. So he and a graduate student keyed in the results of 8092 bird counts (data from 1962 until 1971). The work represented more than a million hours of fieldwork and included sightings of 635 million birds, an effort no single scientist could ever accomplish.

Personal observations can be important, too.

"The chief value is to make it year after year to an area, so you can compare how it changes," says Ben Coffey. In Memphis, he noted the loss of Bewick's Wrens and Double-crested Cormorants over the years. Recently, cormorants have returned.

In 1989, at age 85, Lawrence Walkinshaw and his son decided to return to the spot in Michigan where the senior Walkinshaw started doing counts decades earlier. The results surprised him a little. During the intervening decades, the number of species did not change much, but particular birds did. Red-tailed Hawks seemed to return, after having been hunted for bounty during the 1920s. But Northern Bobwhites were far fewer in number. In 1924, Walkinshaw had found 44 bobwhites on his own. In 1988, 844 observers could find just 46 in the entire state. In contrast, he saw his first European Starling in 1927; 61 years later, 146,975 were seen by the state's counters.

Because of these types of "historical" recollections, bird-count historians like to take note of people who come back year after year to count and compile in the same area.

Douglas Ayers Jr. has done more than 70 counts in Fort Plain, New York, for example, and Milton M. Trautman did 68 in a row in Buckeye Lake, Ohio. Chandler Robbins has compiled 110 bird counts in 16 areas in 4 states, many of them for many years running.

In 1989, on the 90th birthday of the Christmas bird count, we asked participants to help us identify workers and compilers who have excelled throughout the years. The response was staggering. The time, effort, and dedication put into the count inspired us. We've hung on to those surveys, and this report draws upon some of the replies, as well as conversations with counters. We wish we could single out every one of you! —The Editor

Toughing it Out With so much to gain, it's not surprising that zealous participants sometimes get into trouble. One year, Arizona birder and *American Birds* Associate Editor Kenn Kaufman joined the Freeport count and was assigned to watch for seabirds at the end of a jetty. He didn't notice the storm brewing until waves buried his ankles, and then washed him into the sea, borrowed telescope and all. Kaufman lost the telescope, bloodied his hands, and emerged quite cold. But after warming up at a cafe about a mile away, he returned to the jetty post.

"I had three species that no one else on the count had. That was the prize for my time there," he says proudly.

Karl Maslowski still vividly recalls one harrowing experience that he and three buddies had in Ohio. He knew of a yard with hedges and a Gray Catbird he wanted to get for the count. He also knew the owner, or so he thought.

But when his group emerged from the bushes, they were confronted by an angry man with a fully-cocked, double-barreled shotgun. At first the landowner did not even want to hear Maslowski's explanation. Finally he did settle down, and told the birders that some rabbit hunters had been by recently and shot at his house.

“But to this day, I’ve never had the courage to ask if that gun was loaded,” says Maslowski.

Sometimes birders put up with severe weather conditions. Peter Pyle and C.J. Ralph reported that 90-mile-an-hour winds on Maui in 1979 forced one observer to crawl on her hands and knees down the slope of Haleakala (elevation 8650 feet) to avoid being blown off the ridge. In 1950, Mississippi birder W. Marvin Davis and two companions suffered through nine hours of nasty weather in Illinois, where the temperature ranged from -12° F. to 8° F. The next year at the same count the weather warmed: -3° F. to 13° F. Total species each year? About 23.

In 1983, Dennis J. Olle went from Dade County, Florida, on Dec. 17 to Newburyport, Massachusetts, on Dec. 26. For the first count, he wore short sleeves as the temperature soared to 82° F. But he shivered the next week, as the low for the Massachusetts count was 5° F.

Belizean birders like to talk about Dora Weyer, who has



done over 30 counts in the tiny Central American nation. One year Weyer was the only one in her section.

“It rained steadily,” Weyer recalled in a letter to *American Birds* 1989. “I waded Mussel Creek Bridge in water up to my armpits and, soaking wet, shivered the rest of the day. But I had excellent birding. The road had been closed and the birds had not been disturbed by people for two weeks.”

Diehards Even with the hardships, some counters can’t get enough birdwatching. In 1956, Joseph A. Beatty and K. Roger Troutman roamed from Ohio through Pennsylvania and into Maryland, doing a count a day from Dec. 22 to Jan. 1, for a dozen total.

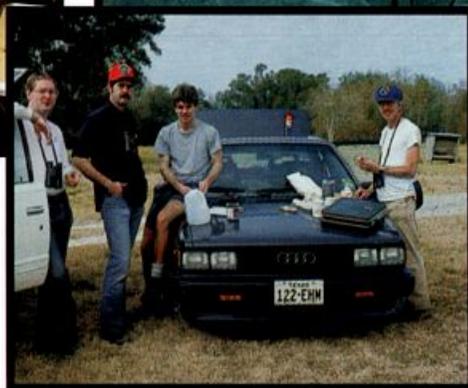
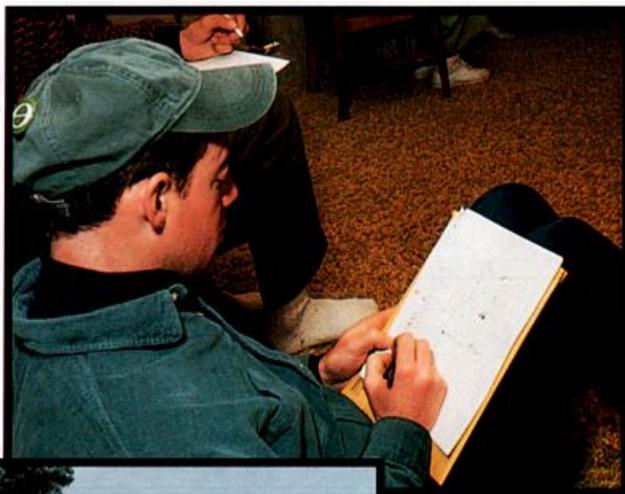
David Brown matched that dozen in 1965 with a whirlwind tour of Texas that began in Odessa on Dec. 21 and ended in Del Rio, Jan. 2. Danny Bystrak and Chandler Robbins did likewise, winding through Maryland, Virginia, and Delaware in 1977. Three years later, Dick Heller did a dozen counts in Colorado.

Rather than squeeze in as many counts as possible, oth-

ers take pride in how far they travel in the count season. In 1975, 1976 and 1977, Pete Pyle managed to do counts in both Maryland and Hawaii. One year, Robbins also did a global trek, traveling between counts on Midway Atoll in Hawaii and Maryland in three days.

Another long-distance trekker is the Rev. Peter Hamel of Toronto, Ontario, who travels 3000 miles each December to the Queen Charlotte Islands in British Columbia to do four counts there.

And there are other kinds of wear and tear. From 1960 to 1990, Rich Stallcup of Inverness, California, participated in 150 Christmas counts. During those 30 years, in



Christmas counters in Freeport, Texas, (right) in the 1980s. Above, the Sullivan County Audubon Society in New York adds up 1992 count day totals. Scott Graber, above right, marks his tally sheet.

which he logged more than 200 hours watching owls, Stallcup wore out eight pairs of binoculars, 16 cars, and one motor scooter.

A Birding Family

Christmas count participants cite many reasons why they keep it up year after year. Some say they see their participation as a way to contribute to science. Others like the competition. But perhaps more than any single birding outing, the Christmas bird count stimulates a sense of fraternity.

“It’s the big social event of the year,” says Joe Morlan, a San Francisco birder who has been on counts for 35 years, starting at age 11 in upstate New York.

“Even people who are not doing much birding any longer still come out,” Morlan adds. Several counts include birders over 100 years old.

Lula and Ben Coffey say they don’t miss having children of their own—many youngsters they met as early birders have become part of a giant surrogate family.

Victor Emanuel puts it simply.

“For me, not having the bird count would be like not having Christmas.”