

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

At the start of his interesting review of the value of the Christmas bird count (*Wilson Bull.* 66:184-195), Paul A. Stewart properly asks two questions: "Of what value are the Christmas bird counts? Can we enhance their value and still hold the interest of the many who make them?" Mr. Stewart competently handles this first query and carefully analyzes some 14 categories in which the Count can stand improvement. These analyses lead him to conclude in a final sentence that "the value of the counts can be enhanced without serious infringement of their popular appeal."

Professional ornithologists will, I am sure, agree that the value of the counts can be enhanced; but Mr. Stewart has, I am afraid, unwarrantedly inserted personal opinion into this last conclusion by claiming that his recommendations will not seriously detract from the present recreational appeal of the project. Certainly his recommendations have not been tested in practice nor does his paper report the results of a questionnaire sampling the reactions of Christmas bird counters to his ideas. Thus what purports to be a *conclusion* is in reality an *hypothesis*.

There is no clear-cut test of this hypothesis that I know of, but it is instructive to note that the fine winter bird census launched by *Audubon Field Notes* in 1948 has failed to demonstrate any widespread popular appeal (nor has its counterpart, the *Audubon Field Notes* breeding-bird census). After some 30 years personal contact with Christmas bird counters, I am pretty much convinced that Mr. Stewart's recommendations are laudable, but unrealistic. To avoid looking for birds near feeders, to refrain from making "squeaks" at nonstandardized intervals and with nonstandardized equipment, to make the use of bird dogs illegal on a count, to keep one's party together when crossing a very wide field,—these are absurdities to the lay mind: they minimize the species list and effectively rob the project of much of its fun.

May I submit that Christmas bird counting is based upon a largely emotional component that still has a reputable place in our materialistic society today? Professional ornithologists will all agree with Mr. Stewart's insistence on the need for honest identifications and the need for better census work. However much we may wish for other improvements in the Christmas count, let us recognize that many of these suggestions impose disciplines that most laymen will simply not accept. The Christmas bird count to them is essentially a recreational activity in which distinct elements of competition, surprise, rarities and the big list are bright and personally thrilling.

My quarrel with Mr. Stewart's paper centers, however, not so much on a conclusion which cannot be supported, but more importantly on what I think is the assumption underlying his paper: "list-chasing has no reputable place in our culture." I think it has. It has no place, I am glad to note, in *The Wilson Bulletin*; it has a definite place in *Audubon Field Notes*. It has its place as a sport, and as a sport, it is perhaps limited only by the strain it puts on the faunalists who compile regional lists and state bird books. I would hate to see the professional ornithologists destroy this stronghold of the amateur by a series of pincer movements carried out under the banner of "No More Variables."

To be perfectly fair to Mr. Stewart, I should acknowledge that his list of suggested prohibitions displays considerable restraint. What I really fear is that, even if his list were accepted by a groaning public, some less restrained colleague will offer another list. There are, of course, many other variables in bird counting that one could eliminate. Hindrances to audibility include boys with squeaky shoes and corduroy trousers, college-student automobiles with mudguards that wave in the wind, young girls that talk your head off, the ocean surf, the winds over 25 m.p.h. Variables in visibility include eye-

glass wearers who haven't had their eyesight checked this year, eye-glasses that fog up, persons who wash their cars after the count (not the night before), fanatics with telescopes, binoculars in a state of disrepair, boys who always get in front of you at the wrong moment, and trees with the same habit.

Variables in identification technique include newcomers to the club, museum men whose current field work is largely confined to foreign countries, people that do not own a copy of a Peterson field guide, and people possessing field guides with mutilated or missing pages. We could, I suspect, eliminate these variables with firmness and dispatch. Tests could be given each applicant a week before the great event. The elite would then shape up as a hard core of cold professionals intermixed with small numbers of thoroughly subdued amateurs. The Christmas Bird Count would then be on a thoroughly scientific level. But would it be democratic? And would it be fun?

If professional ornithologists need refined winter census data here in North America (as I think they do), let them popularize *Audubon Field Notes'* winter bird-population studies and tinker with this project while it is still young. The Christmas bird count is an old established institution. Its primary function is not ornithological, and it should be left to the amateurs. If our continental duck habitat continues its present rate of shrinkage, the count may ultimately be called upon to do more than serve as a harmless substitute for a nineteenth-century Christmas Day "side hunt."

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North American students of bird migration can benefit greatly through an interchange of ideas with their colleagues in Europe. During the past year the undersigned has enjoyed a stimulating correspondence with three leading European authorities on the subject of migration and weather's relation to it. Believing that such intercommunication among fellow workers should be more widespread, I would urge North American students of migration to send their ideas and their reprints to the following: Dr. Holger Holgersen, Stavanger Museum, Stavanger, Norway; Dr. Gunnar Svardson, Omardsvagen 17, Bromma, Sweden; and Mr. Kenneth Williamson, Fair Isle Bird Observatory Trust, 17 India Street, Edinburgh 3, Scotland.

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