

A modest proposal

Those of you who know me, also know how much I like to sit down at a spreadsheet and generate statistics. Well, here's a dataset for you.

In the 2000-01 Christmas Bird Count season, counters in Oregon logged 10560.8 miles driving around inside count circles. The average number of miles driven per count was 293.4 (with a range between 46 and 613). According to the Audubon Database there were 2022 count runs last year (2004-05). Assuming the average miles from Oregon in 2000-01 is a reasonable estimate for all counts last year, that works out to 593165 miles. If I further assume 25 mpg for the average vehicle used on these counts, that works out to about 24000 gallons of gas per CBC season.

Again using the 2000-01 dataset, Oregon count participants logged 837 miles on foot, 20 on motorized boats, 10 on non-motorized boats, 4 on a bicycle and about 35 on skis. Hopefully most of you have figured out where I'm going with this.

I would like to ask count compilers to look hard at their circles and identify ways to cover the same ground while reducing the number of car miles driven on their count. Are there routes that could be done as efficiently by bicycle? Is there a bus route that could move participants from bird spot to bird spot? Could a kayak or canoe cover an area as well as a car on a roadway?

And I would like count participants to ask the same kinds of questions. Could I walk from birdfeeder A to Birdfeeder B rather than drive? Could I ask Team B to pick me up on the way to their area and drop me off at mine? Is there a non-automobile way for me to do my part in the CBC?

I know what some of you are going to say... biking in December?

I've been doing CBC's since the early-70's. I've done them in snow. I've done them in gale force winds with driving rain. I've done them while running a fever of 101°F. But I've also done them on days when I had to worry about getting a sunburn. Obviously this request is weather dependent. Not every participant is capable of spending the day on a bicycle or doing a 20 mile hike. Not every part of a count circle can be practically done by any means other than a car. But I can say from personal experience that much of what I choose to do by car could just as easily be done on foot or by bicycle.

I can remember doing the Cottage Grove Count by bicycle way back when it still existed. I was the only person who found Hutton's Vireo and White-throated Sparrow that year and it was because, riding down the road, I could hear every chickadee flock, not just the ones at the official stopping places. On foot or on a bicycle, stopping is almost never a problem. You hear everything. Areas are covered more thoroughly, more birds get counted.

I think it's time to evaluate the way we do CBC's and make changes where changes make sense. Do I think count areas inside a circle should be re-drawn to facilitate vehicle reduction? Only if it makes sense. Will it affect the integrity of long standing databases? Probably. I have no doubt that more Song Sparrows will get counted and the statisticians will actually have to start paying attention to miles-on-foot. When I went to the online database, I could not find the miles-by-car/miles-by-foot values which is why I was obliged to pull out my 2000-01 hardcopy.

The argument that changes in methodology will have a detrimental impact on the integrity of the database by increasing the number of birds that get counted doesn't really wash with me. I feel reasonably confident that changes associated with walking more and driving less can be accounted for by clever statisticians and even if they can't, that's no excuse for continuing to burn up gas when there are viable alternatives. So, I will be strapping my spotting scope to the luggage bar of my brand new bicycle and taking it along on the CBC's I do. I'm going to try to cut my miles by car in half, if not more. And only a gale force wind or a 101° fever is likely to get in my way.