

Making Ripples

by Amanda Bancroft

Birds don't have to go to Bethlehem to be counted for their census; local birders come to them. Although it isn't nearly as precise as a human census, the Audubon Christmas Bird Count can tell scientists where populations are increasing or decreasing over time, while redirecting the competitive spirit of humanity.

The count was created in 1900 by ornithologist Frank Chapman, who described the idea in *Bird-Lore* magazine: "It is not many years ago that sportsmen were accustomed to meet on Christmas Day, 'choose sides,' and (...) to the fields and woods on the cheerful mission of killing practically everything in fur or feathers that crossed their path – if they could." He explains that, in his present day, things had radically changed, and no reputable sportsman's journal would dare publish an account of these "side hunts" as they used to do, unless condemning it. "Now *Bird-Lore* proposes a new kind of Christmas side hunt, in the form of a Christmas bird-census, and we hope that all our readers who have the opportunity will aid us in making it a success (...)" He goes on to explain the rules and set a new tradition that would spread across the world.

The Fayetteville count circle, which has a 15 mile diameter, occurred on Sunday, December 17th this year. Joe Neal reports that "We had an excellent count with 96 total species (92 for count day, plus 4 more for count week). A record 51 people were out for all or part of the day and three more watched feeders. More people are participating in the count, a good thing. This year's 51 compares to 5 on our first count, December 24, 1961*. Those 5 tallied 57 Northern Bobwhites. Our 2017 tally was zero."

According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Northern Bobwhites were once a common species in eastern North America, but experienced an 85% decline from 1966 to 2014. This is based off reports by the North American Breeding Bird Survey. "The bobwhite's decline probably results from habitat degradation and loss owing to urbanization, fire suppression, and changes to agriculture and forestry."

Neal goes on to explain a shift in our local results. "In 2017, there is much less open undeveloped space within our count circle as compared to 1961." Because of this loss of habitat, the Fayetteville count results are shifting from open fields to mature forests and urban areas. Woolsey Wet Prairie Wildlife Sanctuary provided high counts for LeConte's Sparrow, Palm Warblers and Sedge Wrens. This shows how important Woolsey is for these species to survive.

We're fortunate that these sanctuaries exist in our area, not only for counting birds, but for the "social security" of our ecology. If we pay into preservation now, tomorrow we can still enjoy the clean air and water, outdoor recreation opportunities, historical heritage, artistic and scientific pursuits, and the peace of mind that green space brings.

*The first Fayetteville Christmas Bird Count was held on December 29th, 1920 and found 23 species in four hours, including 25 individual bobwhites, according to *Bird-Lore* magazine's

count records noted in *Arkansas Birds: Their Distribution and Abundance* by James and Neal. Although it began in 1920, it didn't occur consecutively every year since.

Amanda Bancroft is a writer, artist, and naturalist building an off-grid cottage for land conservation on Kessler Mountain. She and her husband Ryan blog about their adventures and offer a solar-hosted online educational center on how to make a difference with everyday choices at: www.RipplesBlog.org.