

# The CBC — a whole day that's for the birds



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**J**ANUARY 3 was for the birds; the whole day in fact. To be specific, the day, in this area anyway, was devoted to the Christmas Bird Count, known simply as the CBC.

The tradition to count birds rather than slaughter them began in 1900, prior to which as many birds fell to the hunter's gun as are now tallied.

These tallies, from approximately 1,500 counts throughout North America, the Caribbean and some Pacific Islands, are sent to American Birds of New York, which publishes the compiled results.

An analysis of the compilation will provide valuable information about population fluctuations, migratory aberrations, species numbers, et cetera.

My part in the CBC began early on that cold post Christmas morning. My spouse and I were detailed to the UBC farm yard where we met the Palmers and Father Charles Brandt, all experienced birders.

We split into two groups, the Palmers looking after one end of the farm while Father Charles, et al, chose the Oyster River edge of the farm.

Fortunately Father Charles has a rather impressive knowledge of bird taxonomy. Left to me we would have recorded thousands of crows and robins; nothing more.

It was exactly 8:35 when the first bird in our area was called out. And if I understand northern raven correctly, I would bet my last sunflower seed that it croaked something disparaging.

I did not have time to dwell on this, for minutes later a couple of smaller birds chirped in the undergrowth beside us.



John Gordon photo

## RED-WINGED blackbirds spotted totalled 56

"There are about three species that have a call-note that are somewhat alike and that at a distance they are difficult to differentiate," Father Charles instructed.

"One is the golden crown kinglet, another is the chestnut backed chickadee and the third is the brown creeper," he continued while adjusting his binocs on a tiny bundle of feathers somewhere in front of him.

We continued our feathered foray and before we had seen a dozen more birds we broke out onto the beachhead, which at high tide had broached the headland.

Our spotting scope picked out dozens of glaucous-winged gulls,

some dunlins, a few white winged scooters, turnstones and greater scaups. The proliferation of species and numbers was nothing short of providential.

The high tide and blustery day had pocketed thousands of birds in the safety of the estuary, just within our scope sight and coincidentally on the day that we chose to count them.

Before the day was out we had seen a couple of birds of note. The first was a tiny raptor known as a merlin (pigeon hawk).

It sat in the uppermost branches

of a small fir very close to us, gazing intently on the weaving mass of birds seaward.

This bird, of all the falcons, is reportedly the master hunter, often achieving greater hunting success than its larger well-known cousin, the peregrine falcon. Not because of any superior physical qualities but more likely due to its persistence.

Dick Decker, contributor to *Nature Canada*, writes that "What young merlins lack in skill and strategy, they make up for in perseverance, sometimes swooping 30 or 40 times, with the prey dodging astutely, until it makes a fatal mistake."

The other noteworthy sight was a European widgeon. Now this may not sound very exotic, but to a birder it was unusual.

The European or Eurasian widgeon, as the name suggests, summers in Northern Europe, Eurasia and Iceland and winters in Northern Africa, Asia Minor, Indo China, Formosa and Japan.

It is a scarce but regular visitor to both Canadian coasts and is listed as accidental on the Campbell River checklist.

Two other possible sightings, considered rare, were a hermit warbler in Willow Point Park and a hutton's vireo near Tyee Spit.

This year 21,000 birds of 90 species were counted while last year there were 27,000 birds of 88 species. No conclusions, however, should be drawn from only two years of results.

On another note, far away from birds, I must comment on the prospect of a West Coast seal hunt. Commercial salmon fishermen say that seals threaten their livelihood and the \$450 million B.C. fishing industry.

And Lee Straight, spokesman for B.C. anglers, whom I thought would be more sensitive to the wax and wane of life in the sea, remarked in the *Vancouver Sun* that "There isn't room for both of us."

I have heard commercial fishermen boast that they shoot seals on sight.

It appears that seals have become the latest scapegoat for the mismanaged salmon fishing industry. An opinion that Fisheries Minister Tom Siddon, in his zeal to lead the hounds from the true scent, grabbed like a drowning man would a straw.

He later retracted his off the cuff remarks made on Jack Webster's TV show, that something must be done about "the overpopulation". Public opinion obviously still carries a little weight with his government.

We must not let our coastal wildlife suffer the same sentence of execution as chronicled by Farley Mowat in his book *Sea of Slaughter*.

To allow, even, as Mowat puts it, a "controlled cull" would be to invite

disaster. All the pent up frustrations of poor salmon returns, over harvestation, closures and bureaucratic bungling would ensure it.

And after the last seal has sunk in its gore, which other species will fall prey to man's declining salmon fortunes? Perhaps the killer whale. Think about it.