

From David Muth, Regional Editor, via LABird 12/7/04:

This is a note for CBC compilers, but it might be useful for CBC participants as well. Bear with me, and I apologize for the length.

I have been Louisiana editor for the CBC for two years now, and it is time I communicated with compilers about where things have been over the last two years, and where we might go. Like you, I've spent a lot of time working with a frustrating database under a deadline, and learning it as I went along. I haven't had time to do much communicating with compilers during the process of editing. As a consequence, I've been forced to make some rather arbitrary decisions when I encountered doubts, mistakes, or confusions in the data you've entered. In order to avoid or minimize future problems and misunderstandings, I'd like to send out a few suggestions and clarifications, based upon what I've encountered so far.

Bold-facing rarities:

Bold-facing seems to cause a lot of confusion, and, often leads to unhappiness. There is no hard and fast rule about what should or should not be bold-faced.

The decision to bold-face or not to bold-face is the compiler's, period.

When should you bold-face? Again, that is a philosophical question. It depends. I'll offer my own thoughts--I believe in liberal bold-facing. Bold-facing makes your count more interesting, and highlights what is special about your area. Even if a bird is routine in a given count circle--say Calliope Hummingbird at Baton Rouge or Painted Bunting at Venice or Smith's Longspur at Shreveport, from a regional or even national perspective, these are special birds, and deserve a little limelight. Bold-facing helps break up the monotony of the published count (in the JLO) or on the NAS CBC web-page.

However, there is a catch: if you choose to bold-face, you must provide copies of first-person documentation, or **YOU WILL GET A NASTY COMMENT** from the editor.

"Aha!" you say, if I want to avoid nasty editorial comments, I won't bold-face. Alas, no. In many cases, failure to bold-face a real rarity will get **AN EVEN NASTIER COMMENT** from your editor, or worse, the editor will decide that failure to bold-face must indicate a mistake, and I'll delete it outright. (Actually, I won't really delete it unless it is clearly a mistake--5 Yellow-billed Loons but no Common Loons, for instance.) So use your head.

I know some of you compilers don't really feel you have the expertise to make such decisions. The tried and true answer is to ask an expert or experts, preferably one(s) who routinely participate in the count, to be your internal reviewers--recommending bold-facing, and reviewing the adequacy of submitted first-person documentation. As a last resort, you can ask my opinion--but usually if you wait that long it will be too late to get a first person account from the observer that is anything but repetition of field marks from a guide. And, in any case, there is probably someone local who knows your area and its birds better than me.

Documentation is often a good idea even when no bold-facing is warranted. For instance, in separating scaup, or white geese, or small grebes, or small doves, or long-tailed grackles (in some areas), or reddish finches, or plegadis (in some areas), or night-herons, or nuthatches, or grass sparrows, it is a good idea to give the editor some idea that the observer knew which way was up. It doesn't have to be much--in cases where one cryptic species is expected but much less common than its twin, just make it clear that the observer is not oblivious to the problem and took it into account when the i.d. was made. A feather by feather description is nice, and good for the describer's soul, but its not necessarily required, when no bold-facing is warranted.

And remember, a picture is worth a thousand words...

Hummingbirds:

One area of considerable angst for compilers is wintering hummingbirds. In an effort to simplify everybody's work, I'll offer a few suggestions. Generally speaking, I will not expect documentation for a claim of *Selasphorus* sp., Rufous/allen's, *Archilochus* sp., or Buff-bellied hummingbird seen on a count in south Louisiana, roughly from the I-10/I-12 corridor south. Compilers for circles in central and north Louisiana should be guided by their count's history and the local/regional situation in making bold-face decisions (as always).

For claims of adult male Rufous, or male Black-chinned or Ruby-throated (when not bold-faced), a simple notation to that effect--"Adult Male" or "immature male black-chinned, gorget color seen" will suffice. If assigning non- adult male *Selasphorus* or non-male *Archilochus* to species, or any other species--Calliope, Broad-tailed, Allen's, etc., I'd like to see some indication from the compiler that the i.d. is valid. I know in many cases counting these birds amounts to a case of checking off a bird already banded. Just make a note--something like "stakeout" or "present for some time" or "identified in hand" and then give the bander's name and, preferably, the date of banding or last handling. I will not expect any description beyond that: I'm not going to second-guess the banders, and I won't lose sleep over wondering whether or not the banded *Selasphorus* in the front garden is really the Rufous banded by NLN on Dec. 5, or is a look-alike Allen's banded by BO on Dec. 6 in Texas that subsequently slipped across the border and replaced the Rufous in your garden. I'm not going to worry about it because there is nothing to be done short of recapturing every banded hummingbird in the circle on count day and re-reading the bands. You can enter these notes onto the CBC web-page, since the compiler will be sending in the info; it should not require a copy of the first hand report from the observer (though it is fine if you want to do it that way).

Obviously, any bold-faced individual of a species of hummingbird that has not been banded will need full documentation to avoid editorial scorn. And enter 6 Ruby-throated and 17 Black-chinned w/o any indication of how you got there, and your editor will have no choice but to admonish you with a nasty editorial comment.

For the most part, I'd expect to see any LBRC review list species bold-faced. Even if your count has recorded Broad-billed for five years running, it is still a rarity (for now) in the grand scheme of things.

More later. I welcome questions, feedback, suggestions, criticisms and commentary (but remember, your count's ultimate species tally is in my hands).

High Counts

The CBC database web interface allows you to easily see the previous high count of any given species for your count as you are entering data. If it is a high count, or ties a high count, or is the same league with a high count (on a long-running count) check it off. Try to be informative. If you don't do it, I will when editing, but I'd appreciate not having to do that for 20 counts. If you know that your count is high based upon party hours rather than numerical total--check it off. If you see a really low count, make a note to me, at least until compilers have that online capability. I can add "LO" as an editorial comment.

Species vs. Species Pairs

When you estimate a flock of White-faced Ibis in southwest Louisiana, you are technically estimating some small percentage of Glossy Ibis. Some of you are tempted to enter "*plegadis* sp." rather than White-faced Ibis. Please don't. As a rule of thumb, if the expected species will constitute 90%+ of a flock, use that species to report as the default. After all, when you report a flock of 100,000 Snow Geese, some small percentage of that flock is certainly made up of Ross' Geese, but you aren't going to report "white goose" sp. Remember, we are trying to be informative. Count minority look-alike species in large flocks as identified individuals, tick off the rest as the default. Obviously, in areas where Glossy and White-faced totals are not quite so skewed, such as southeast Louisiana, "*plegadis*" is the proper entry.

Sub-species and forms:

As with look-alike species, when dealing with identifiable sub-species or forms, use the expected one. "Slate-colored" Junco, not Dark-eyed; "Yellow-shafted" Flicker, not Northern Flicker; "Myrtle" Warbler, not Yellow-rumped Warbler. We don't live in an area where two or more identifiable forms (for CBC purposes) can be found. If your count was lucky enough to get another subspecies, boldface and document.

Calculating party hours and party miles.

Party hours are one of the most important data sets collected on CBCs. It is important to get them accurately recorded, so bear with me.

A 'party hour' is any time spent counting birds by any number of persons independently of other people. A party can consist of any number of people, including one. A party need not be constituted as such for the entire day, and parties may combine and split throughout the day.

If you are seeing and hearing birds that no one else is hearing or seeing, then the time spent doing so represents independent party hours. Party hours 'on foot' include all of your time outside of a car or a boat, even when you are standing next to your car. Only time spent birding from within a car (or boat) should be calculated as party hours by car (or boat). Time spent 'owling' essentially means time spent before first light, or after twilight.

Example: four people set out together one half hour before dawn. They stop at a likely spot and listen for owls next to their car for fifteen minutes. They get back into the car, drive to another spot, with the windows closed, and spend fifteen minutes listening for owls at the new spot. Even if no owls are recorded, that would be calculated as one half party-hour and zero party miles. (If you had cruised between spots with the windows down actively looking and listening for owls, you'd add some party miles and hours owling.)

Party miles should be conservatively calculated. Remember, you can't have more party miles by car than there are miles of road in your area. If you backtrack, you are not counting new birds, so those miles don't count. An easy way to calculate your party miles by car is to just keep track on a map of where you've been, and calculate your mileage from there.

Also remember that most time on foot is spent standing still or moving slowly. As a rule, you are usually unlikely to be covering more than a mile in an hour, and often much less, especially if you are hopping from spot to spot by car. But, if your group splits into two parties, and each party independently walks one mile over the course of an hour, that is two party miles and two party hours.

Example: starting at dawn, your group of four sticks together in one vehicle for two hours, driving from spot to spot. You cover eight highway miles, hitting four spots for about fifteen minutes each, from which you squeak and pish for land birds and scope for water birds. Calculation: 1 party hour and eight miles by car; 1 party hour and zero miles on foot.

After that, your group arrives at a good area. Half the group sets off walking through a field. They cover 1 mile in an hour. The other half of the group wander through the woods. They cover only half a mile in that hour. Calculation: 2 party hours and 1.5 party miles on foot.

Later in the day, the group of four might split up again, with one left scoping a marsh, two walking along the road for mile, and the driver covering yet another area by car. The calculation might look like this: 0.5 party hours and 2 party miles by car for the driving party; 0.5 party hours and 0 party miles on foot for the scoping party; and 0.5 party hours and 1 party mile on foot for the two that hiked briskly along the road. During this time, your group was split into three parties.

At the end of the day, your group's report might look something like this:

No. Observers = 4
No. of Parties = 1-3
Start Time = 6:00 a.m.
End Time = 5:30 p.m.
Total Hours = 11.5
Party Hours: on foot = 14; by car = 4; by boat = 0; owling = 0.5; total = 18.5
Party Miles: on foot = 6; by car = 48; by boat = 0; owling = 0; total = 54

Notice that your group was variously from one to three parties; you were afield for 11.5 hours, but because you were not always together, the total party hours equaled 18.5.

A few pointers: use common sense. This is not an exact measurement. Often a group is birding the same general area and remains generally in voice contact, for the most part seeing the same birds, splitting and coalescing as they work the area, often showing each other their birds, but occasionally making independent discoveries. Under these circumstances, convention dictates that they have remained one party, and that they will produce a combined group list for that spot.

As for calculating exact hours and miles, again, use common sense. With thousands of counts, and thousands of counters, the margins of error are huge in the CBC database. Don't sweat the details. Try to get a reasonable estimate, but don't waste a lot of time on calculations or fretting over your accuracy. Believe it or not, far and away the most important number you produce (after the number of birds seen), is party hours. This is the number researchers need to standardize those bird totals from count to count and year to year. You will see the result over and over again: birds per party hour.

The number, birds/party hour, allows us to compare bird densities from one count circle to another and from one year to another. Suppose the Freeport, Texas CBC, with 150 observers racks up 750 party hours. Suppose they find 15 Wilson's Warblers. The calculation is $15/750$ for 0.02 Wilson's Warblers found per hour of searching. Now suppose New Orleans, with 30 observers, racks up only 150 party hours, and finds 6 Wilson's Warblers. That would be $6/150$ equals 0.04 Wilson's per hour afield. In other words, Wilson's Warbler was twice as common $\{0.04 = (2 \times 0.02)\}$ in New Orleans as in Freeport. That is the basic calculation, absent a lot of other factors like habitat covered, and absent any calculation of the statistical significance of the variance. While we birders tend to measure our rivalries in absolute numbers, the really important numbers are proportional. Thus getting a good number for party hours is as important as an accurate estimate of absolute numbers.

Which brings up the final point: split up! Cover more territory. Get your party hours up, and you'll get your total numbers of birds and your total number of species up. Even when you stop and get out of a car, get in the habit of looking in different directions or using different techniques. If one person is scanning a flock with a telescope, another might scan the sky for soaring hawks with binoculars, while others might wander off and see what they can squeak out of the roadside brush. As long as you remain within sight and sound of each other, count it as one party working, but maximize the effectiveness of your party.

If there is a wood-lot or field to be worked, split up. Agree on a time to rendezvous, but let each of you cover a different geographic area, singly or in pairs. Remember the conventions about party hours, of course. And do this splitting up within reason. There is no point in sending novices off by themselves. Also, it is often a good idea for more than one set of eyes to look at a field, beach, mud-flat, marsh, pond or lake. Sometimes, two sets of eyes are needed to best advantage in a thicket to work over a mixed species flock that is mobbing a screech owl tape. And always try to get another birder to see a rarity, especially if it needs to be documented. So, while splitting up is generally effective, it is not always the only or the best strategy. Rarely, however, are more than two experienced birders needed in a given party. The best solution is often to pair the more experienced members of a group with the less experienced.

But, first and foremost, have fun. There is no point in being miserable, or making others miserable. The idea is to get them back on future Xmas Counts.