Illinois Spring Bird Count: 44 Years and Counting

That time is quickly approaching when citizen scientists (birders in this case) throughout Illinois prepare to head out for the annual Spring Bird Count (SBC). Volunteers conduct bird censuses across the state each year on the Saturday that falls between May 4 and May 10.

In 1959, the organizer of the North American Breeding Bird Survey, Chandler Robbins, organized the first Spring Bird Count in Maryland. In the early 1970s, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) turned to Vernon Kleen (retired state ornithologist) to organize the first Illinois statewide SBC. Vern had been mentored by Chandler Robbins and helped with the first SBC in Maryland, making him the ideal candidate to take on such a large task in Illinois. With the help of the Illinois Audubon Society, the first count was conducted on Saturday, 6 May 1972 and included 650 observers in 62 counties.

Vern continued organizing the count for over 30 years before transitioning the count to the Illinois Natural History Survey, where it is currently organized by Tara Beveroth and Mike Ward. Reports from the SBC are published each year in the Meadowlark, a journal of the Illinois Ornithological Society.

Censuses are conducted in all 102 counties in Illinois. However, because this is volunteer dependent, in any given year there may be counties not censused (see figure below). Each county has a compiler responsible for recruiting volunteers and assigning them to areas within the county to census. Some counties have over 100

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1975
- Red-winged Blackbird
- Common Grackle
- House Sparrow
- European Starling
- American Robin
- Indigo Bunting
- Eastern Meadowlark
- Blue Jay
- Mourning Dove
- Northern Cardinal
- Chimney Swift
- Barn Swallow
- American Goldfinch
- Rock Dove
- Brown-headed Cowbird
- Red-headed Woodpecker
- Song Sparrow
- American Crow
- Field Sparrow
- Gray Catbird

2014
- Red-winged Blackbird
- American Robin
- Common Grackle
- European Starling
- Canada Goose
- Northern Cardinal
- Double-crested Cormorant
- House Sparrow
- American Goldfinch
- Brown-headed Cowbird
- Cliff Swallow
- Indigo Bunting
- Mourning Dove
- Barn Swallow
- American Coot
- Tree Swallow
- Gray Catbird
- Palm Warbler
- Ring-billed Gull
- Common Yellowthroat

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ABOVE  State Ornithologist Vernon Kleen

ABOVE  Number of Illinois counties censused during Spring Bird Count each year.

LEFT  The 20 most abundant birds in 1975 and 2014 based on SBC data.

BELOW (Left to Right) Red-winged Blackbird, Canada Goose, Chimney Swift.
volunteers, making the compiler’s job vital to prevent double counting an area.

Some volunteers may start as early as midnight on the day of the count. Volunteers record all birds that they see or hear, the number of hours spent looking for birds during the day, the number of hours they spend “owling” (pre-dawn hours), the number of miles driven in a car, and the number of miles walked. All data are sent to the county compiler to tabulate and submit to the state compiler.

May 7th, 2016 will mark the 45th Spring Bird Count in Illinois. Novice and returning birders alike enjoy participating in the count. For some, this may be the one time of the year they dust off their rusty bird identification skills and really hone them, while others are eager to try and break species high-count records.

With over 40 years of SBC data, we can look at trends in a species’ population, range movement, distribution, and even document rare species. Over the past 40 years, SBC data has shown declines in species that were once common, including the Red-headed Woodpecker and Chimney Swift. These species have declined due to habitat loss and food availability.

Data have also shown that introduced species have increased in abundance throughout the state. For instance, the House Finch was originally a west coast species but was introduced into the pet trade on the east coast in the 1940s. It has been making its way westward ever since, as can be supported by SBC data.

Vagrant migrants (birds that don’t normally occur in an area) can make a birder’s year. Here are some that have been detected during Illinois SBC:

- White-tailed Kite, 1987, Knox County
- Ferruginous Hawk, 2002, Alexander County
- Snowy Plover, 2015, Cook County
- Arctic Tern, 1995, Will County
- Violet-green Swallow, 2015, Cook County
- Bullock’s Oriole, 1994, Macon County

These data will soon be easily available for public use. Until that time, if you are interested in the data, contact beveroth@illinois.edu. Because of the nature of these data, declines or increases in certain species’ population trends may not accurately reflect true changes in populations, and statistical tests should be performed to determine if observed trends differ from a stable (no change) trend.

The count would not be possible without the continued support of volunteers and compilers as well as various organizations including, but not limited to, the Illinois Audubon and local chapters, Illinois Ornithological Society, IDNR, The Nature Conservancy, Bird Conservation Network, and numerous Illinois Nature and Forest Preserves. For more information, including a list of county compilers to contact if you are interested in participating, visit http://wwx.inhs.illinois.edu/collections/birds/sbc/

Tara Beveroth & Mike Ward, INHS

Now available! Illinois Birds: Forest Species is the first in a series of identification card sets for Illinois Birds. Each card features life history information, color photograph and life-sized egg illustration. For more information visit: https://shop.inrs.illinois.edu/inhs-bio-edu.html