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North American Breeding Bird Survey MEMORANDUM TO COOPERATORS

SUMMER 2014

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NEW OBSERVERS WELCOME

If this is your first year, thank you for joining the flock of thousands who make the BBS a success! Through your efforts and those of your peers, federal, state, and local conservation agencies have reliable bird population information on which to base sound conservation and management decisions. We want your BBS observer experience to be as enjoyable and meaningful as possible. In working towards this goal we provide many resources, conveniently located on our general web site, to assist you (www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbs). For instance, via the “Data Entry” link on our home page, you can log into our online data entry system where you can take the methodology training, enter your bird data, and maintain stop location information for your route(s). You can also use this site to easily update your contact information and to view and print your historical data. The comprehensive online *Dendroica* bird sound reference tool is available year-round via the “Learning Tools” link and is especially handy for brushing up on identification skills throughout the winter and spring. If you have any questions or problems regarding the BBS, please do not hesitate to contact your state coordinator or us at the national office. You can find our contact information both online and at the close of this memorandum, and we are always happy to hear from you.

Here are a few guidelines to follow to help ensure that your BBS season is as productive and enjoyable as it can be:

- 1) Log into the online data entry system and complete the BBS Methodology Training program and the final review. We cannot use your data if you do not.
- 2) Pay close attention to survey instructions (especially regarding observer requirements, survey timing, and specific route start time as shown on data forms).
- 3) Scout your route before the actual survey day to avoid unexpected delays.
- 4) Submit your data electronically for faster feedback.
- 5) Return your maps and paper data in a timely manner at the end of each season.
- 6) HAVE FUN!

COORDINATOR UPDATES & HELP NEEDED

We welcome Russ Norvell to his new role as **Utah** state coordinator. We will miss Russ's predecessor, Jim Parrish, not least of which for his many years of generous service, and we wish Jim the very best of new found birding and travel time in retirement. We are pleased that Russ has taken up the torch and we look forward to working with him into the future.

Further west, in **California**, Peter Beck has joined the industrious coordinating team of Daniel Applebee and Rob Doster where he'll now largely oversee the southern portion of that great state. Welcome aboard Peter and thanks for volunteering! We would also like to thank Brian Williams for his time and dedication in having similarly coordinated parts of the state over the past many years; we are most appreciative!

We continue our search for a state coordinator for **Delaware**. Having just 10 routes in a region with some of the mid-Atlantic's most dedicated and enthusiastic birders, Delaware represents a great opportunity for someone looking to contribute to the birding community in a new role. Additionally, the BBS is seeking suggestions for a new co-coordinator for northern and western areas of **New York** who will lend assistance to Charlie Smith, who has been single-handedly managing all of New York for many years.

If you think you might like to increase your involvement in the BBS program and help coordinate the efforts of some of the best birders and most dedicated conservation minded folks in the country, please contact us at the national office. We would especially appreciate help directing the BBS effort in the states listed above. As always, a complete list of current state and national coordinators and their contact information is available from the BBS web page via the "Contact Us" link.

TOP 2 MOST FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS OF 2013

** I keep seeing the BBS described as an "index" survey – what does that mean?*

A great question and one that's easiest to answer in light of a fact that's well known to all birders: there are incredibly few places in the world where one could actually see and/or hear every individual bird present. There are lots of reasons for this (some overly simple, like you might have been looking in the wrong direction when a bird flew by) but the most universal is that some birds are nearly always present but are simply not doing anything that allow us to detect them (secretive marsh birds being a great example). In terms of bird counting, what this means is that, unless you're expending considerable time and effort using one of several highly specialized field methods, your bird counts will have only captured some portion of the overall population that was actually present at your count site. That is a real problem for some projects, but incomplete counts like this can still serve as a meaningful proxy for measuring how, and to what degree, the overall population at a place is going up or down over time ... that is, provided that you're careful to measure the same proportion of the population each time you visit. This is what the BBS aims to do and why it is termed an *index* survey (index, from Latin, means 'to point to', and the incomplete counts are functioning in that way by mirroring the changes we'd see if we had complete counts). This also underscores why BBS protocols are so strict. As birders we all learned early on that the proportion of birds that we can detect goes up and down depending on the time of day that we're birding, the time of year, how focused we are on counting, what the weather's like, etc., etc. By strictly adhering to BBS protocols when you run your route(s) you're

helping to ensure that you're counting the same proportion of birds between years at each stop. And that ensures that the BBS continues as a good, reliable index to local, regional, and continental bird population trends.

** Why doesn't the BBS have an app for recording data on a handheld in the field?*

This is a sentiment that we often hear in the BBS office and it's certainly one that each of our staff can (and does) personally relate to, especially given that we've each championed the notion to our peers at one time or another. But an alluring concept doesn't always translate into an effective solution, and the ubiquity of apps in today's environment can make it easy to lose sight of critical balance points that determine whether something is ultimately helpful (or hurtful) to a program on the whole. It is important here to bear in mind that the BBS is a scientifically rigorous monitoring program that relies on a kind of data collection that involves a number of responsibilities, and these go beyond simply speeding up data entry while in the field. Being an index survey, the entire BBS methodology is oriented towards standardizing the counting process as much as possible so as to remove or control for counting factors that, by themselves, cause changes in counts between years. Handhelds have a definite potential to help facilitate this process given ideal equipment, under ideal settings, and with ample time – but most BBS observers will be quick to point out that cell service is not ideal across the country, that time is very tight on BBS surveys, and that fully focusing on birds is essential to maintaining a consistency of counting between years. Handheld aficionados rest assured though, as more and more BBS observers acquire smart phones and as wireless networks continue to improve, our office will continue looking for that tipping point when we can request the appreciable funding and staffing needed to develop and maintain a robust data entry app for use on multiple device platforms.

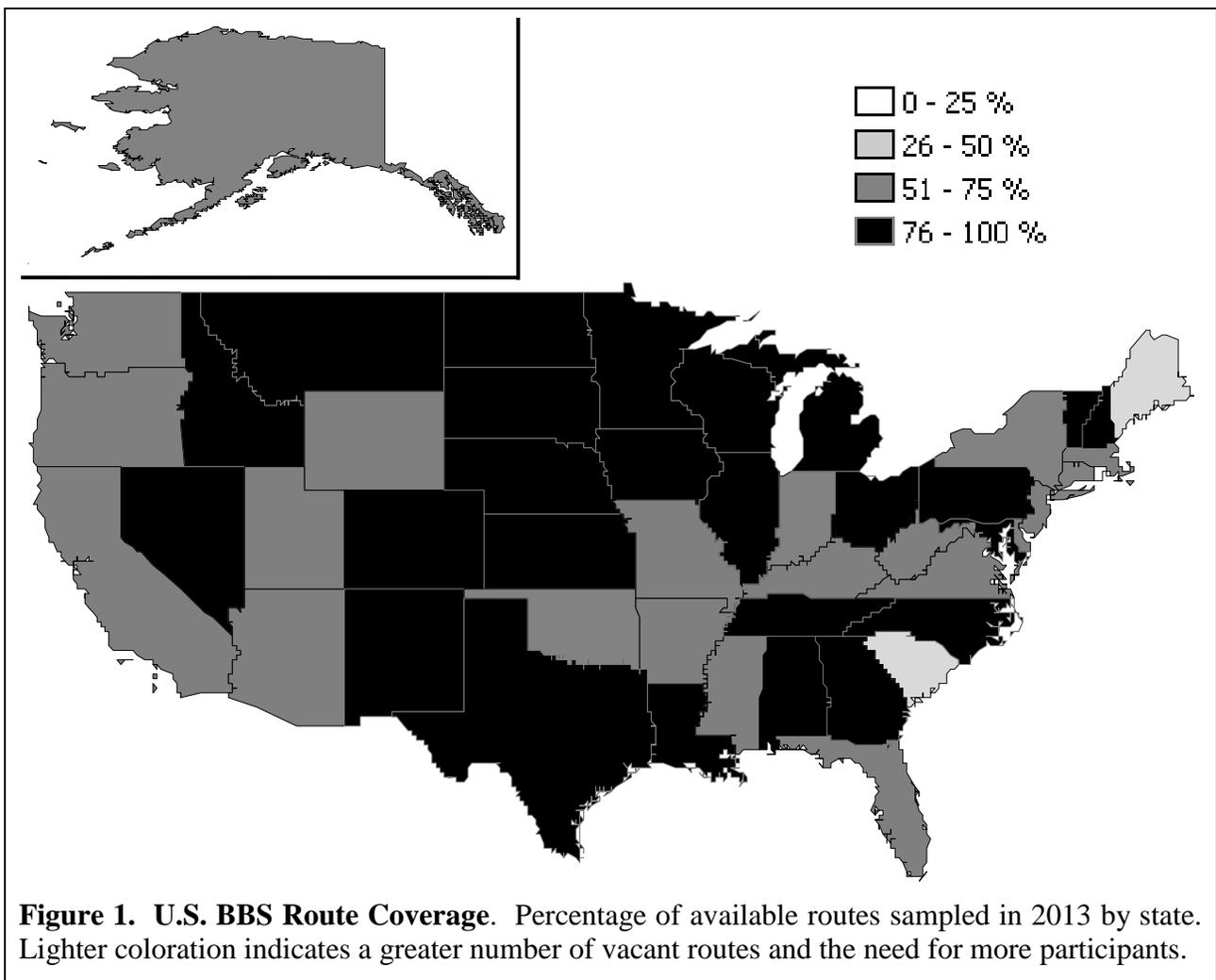
2013 ROUTE COVERAGE

Our thanks to everyone who participated in the 2013 BBS season! Data for 3053 routes have been received by the national office so far. While the numbers are not exact (a small percentage of 2013 data have yet to arrive), both Figure 1 and Table 1 below provide good indication of how route coverage in each state played out. Eleven states increased their coverage by 5-10 routes compared to the 2012 season. Of these eleven, efforts by observers and respective coordinators (Eric Soehren, Maurice Mills, Ray Adams & Katie Koch, Dan Twedt, and Russ Norvell) in Alabama, Maine, Michigan, Mississippi, and Utah helped to offset or recoup losses experienced in those states during the 2012 season. And the dedicated folks in Arizona, Nebraska, and North Dakota (including coordinators Troy Corman, Joel Jorgensen, and Ron Martin, respectively) even managed to bank some extras to improve their state's overall coverage. The same was true for coordinator Janet Haslerig and her dedicated team in the "Show-Me" state, though the %-coverage map doesn't bear this out because these hard-working Missourians had added nearly 30 brand new routes to the state in 2013!

Top accolades also go to the diligent observers in Georgia and Nevada and their respective coordinators (Todd Schneider and Cris Tomlinson) for having achieved consecutive years of growth. Maintaining consistent growth over multiple years is a task more difficult than it might appear; the vagaries of weather and unforeseen time conflicts test observers' persistence and measure a coordinator's route filling acumen. Two states had sampled 90% or more of their available routes in 2013. This is an appreciable feat so we want to especially acknowledge the

dedicated observers in North Dakota and Pennsylvania and also their respective state coordinators (Ron Martin and Dan Brauning) for this fine accomplishment.

Twelve states experienced a coverage loss of more than five routes in 2013. Check and see if your state was one of them by comparing the “sampled in” columns from 2012 and 2013 in Table 1. Additional observer assistance is needed in Alaska, Arkansas, California, New York, Oregon, and Wyoming to overcome recent coverage losses that have reduced sampling efforts there to below the 60% mark. Observers are also sorely needed in Maine and South Carolina where fewer than 50% of routes were covered in 2013 (see figure 1), leaving plenty of room for qualified observers wishing to make a difference in those states. If you roost in any of these states or in one of the many other states that experienced reduced coverage, please encourage your qualified birder friends to migrate over to the state coordinator to lend a wing. As always, coordinator contact information is conveniently accessed on our web site via the “Contact Us” link.



BETTER LATE THAN NEVER - Do you have BBS data from previous years that were never sent in? Remember, it is never too late. Whether they are from last year or a decade ago, we can still use them. While we don't wish to promote late data submission, don't throw them out just because they are old; send them to us!

PARTICIPANT MILESTONES

With the completion of the 2013 BBS season, 126 participants have achieved the following BBS milestones (*recipients appear in alphabetical order grouped by award category*):

10-years — 66 participants:

Daniel Albano, Adrianna Araya, Jason Beason, Peter Beck, Mary Ann Benoit, Lisa Berger, David Blevins, Michael Boatwright, Gwenda Brewer, Bo Brown, Cyndie Browning, Melissa Cady, Nathan Carlsen, Susan Carpenter, Kathleen Crawford-Rose, Randy Dettmers, Rita Dixon, Johnida Dockens, Timothy Driscoll, Edward Fair, James Funk, Steven Gabrey, Matt Gearheart, Joel Geier, Dan Guthrie, Charles Hayes, Steve Hodge, Mary Ann Hoeffliger, Mary Jefferson, Brian Johnson, Eric Kershner, Christy Klinger, Evan Mann, Art Mcmorris, Michael Meisenburg, Janet Millard, Mike Morgante, Richard Nelson, Chris Newbold, Neal Niemuth, Joe Okoniewski, Jason Paulios, Tim Post, Roz Renfrew, Justin Roach, Rhonda Rothrock, Bob Sargent, Robert Sargent, Paulette Scherr, Bill Schmoker, Vicki Schwartz, William Shepard, Gary Slater, Paul Slingsby, Scott Stoleson, Philip Stouffer, Bryan Swift, Jeffrey Trollinger, Marilyn Turnage, Thomas Walker Jr., Jackie West, Tom Will, Stu Wilson, Joseph Woodley, Jonathan Wuepper, Will Yandik

20-years — 35 participants:

Dennis Austin, Scott Bills, Scott Fisher, Kathy Granillo, Ruth Gronquist, Melinda Hetrick, Terry Ireland, Elizabeth Johnson, Steve Kistler, Richard Kleinleder, Denise Laberteaux, Ellen Lawler, Len Lindstrand III, Jeff Mangum, Nora Murdock, Kathleen Paulin, William Pulliam, James Renfro, Linda Riner, Tommie Rogers, Mike Rogers, Jeff Sewell, Clifford Shackelford, Julian Shepherd, V. Arnold Smith, Laura Sommers, Dennis Southerland, John Sproul, Mark Stensaas, Gray Tappan, Marjorie Tattersall, Bruce Walgren, Donna Walgren, Nada Wareham, Ronda Woodward

30-years — 9 participants:

Jeffrey Baughman, James Coleman, Jr, Paul Fellers, Robbye Johnson, Thomas Schultz, Martin St.Louis, Daniel Sullivan, David Vogt, Peter Webb

40-years — 3 participants:

Robert Bradley, Edward Hopkins, David Junkin

50 Routes sampled — 13 participants:

Mark Flippo, Janet Green, Mikey Lutmerding, Keith Merkel, Kim Potter, William Pulliam, Roger Rose, Scott Seltman, Clifford Shackelford, Laura Sommers, David Vogt, Steve West, Steven Wilson

Years-of-service calculations are based on the actual number of years that observers returned data for one or more of their assigned BBS routes. While we value and appreciate contributions made by assistants on routes, we are unfortunately unable to perform such calculations for them given the limitations of our strictly relational database based on observer numbers. If you work with an assistant that has participated in the BBS for any of the milestone time periods above and feel that they should be recognized for their service, please contact us in writing; include your assistant's name and address in the correspondence and we will gladly commend them for their outstanding service as well.

Congratulations to all and thank you again for your commitment to the BBS!

ROUTE PROBLEMS

As the degree of urbanization has steadily increased over the past decade, not surprisingly, so too has the number of route problem requests that the BBS receives annually. Safety is the highest priority in the BBS, and the staff would like to maintain a safe as well as fun experience for all observers. As might be imagined, we receive a large volume of requests each year and, though time and staff is severely limited, we do our best to resolve route problems before the upcoming field season. Observers can send hazard related issues directly to us using our route problem email address bbsrouteproblems@usgs.gov or, if submitting data online, via the route problems section of the comments page.

We strongly appeal to observers to consider before submitting route problem requests that, while routes with dwindling natural habitat are certainly less appealing than those in more pristine areas, progressively urbanizing routes are critical to the survey's ability to measure the landscape level change that birds are experiencing. Even so, there are situations where routes become too challenging to hear birds on or suffer from other problems, such as very heavy traffic, road closures, and safety hazards. In these cases, please first consider that many problems can be solved simply by shifting a stop by the permitted .10 of a mile or by running the route as 'Sunday only', a day when traffic is usually significantly less. In cases where significant safety hazards are imminent and immediate, please cease sampling at that location and call the BBS office directly (301-497-5803) for an immediate route solution.

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

At the end of each field season the national office receives hundreds of notes detailing fascinating sightings, unusual occurrences, and outright tales of adventure from recent runs on BBS routes. As in previous years, this past season we received a number of brief musings and succinctly written stories that we feel well represent various aspects of the BBS experience. And one aspect that we find very interesting to read about here in the office is the relationship of weather and culture that's often born out in these stories. Sure, we know that Alaska, the west, mid-Atlantic and Northeast experienced warmer than average temperatures in June 2013 and that the Ohio Valley and east coast were wetter than average whilst the west was dryer than average; but sometimes it takes seeing these things expressed through personal stories to fully appreciate the weather's impact. Jenny Bryant's tale from west-central Alaska is a great example:

"My hometown of Galena was flooded during the break-up of the Yukon River in May. My family and I were evacuated to the village of Ruby (50 miles upriver), where we stayed for a month while my husband repaired our home enough for us to return. During my stay in Ruby, I was able to conduct the Ruby Road BBS, which was one of the few "normal" things possible. I returned home to Galena at the end of June. Our Fish & Wildlife Service office building sustained major water damage and only recently regained heat and power. Our community is mostly back to functional (with a few changes) - but school is in session and we are heading into winter in pretty good shape!"

Here are two more, respectively, from Kathy Granillo on the Sedan, New Mexico route and Patsy Inglet on the Utopia, Texas route detailing the mosaic-like conditions that the southwest had seen:

"New Mexico is in a severe drought, and the landscape along this route was pretty bleak in June. The grasses had yet to green up and the ranchers had to bring supplemental food out to their cattle herds. I had three stops where a herd of cows was nearby, saw me, and came

running and mooing, thinking I was bringing them food. Each time it was about 50 cows with calves, and they mooed incessantly through the entire count.”

“Getting rained out three mornings in a row was frustrating, but it's hard to get a Texan to complain too much about getting rain. Probably our most surprising bird was the Barred Owl that swooped down into a pasture to catch some food while we were surveying that spot. It landed with its back to us, but immediately confirmed its identity when it turned and stared us down with those dark, dark eyes. Never made a sound of any kind. We were also pleased to hear a Golden-cheeked Warbler singing at one of the points with appropriate habitat. Perhaps it had finished raising its first brood and was declaring territory to start another one.”

Change is a constant throughout the BBS survey area and, as many observers have noted along their routes, some of the causes of these changes bring more lasting consequences for the landscape than does weather. Dan Brauning’s description of events along his Little Pine Creek, Pennsylvania route provides us insight into the scope of changes occurring there:

“This route transects some pretty remote country in central Pennsylvania. I could probably count the number of vehicles that have passed me (except the first few stops) on one hand in previous years. With growing Marcellus Shale Gas development in the area, that is changing rapidly. Notable this year was the narrow road travelling up the valley from Little Pine SP - I've seen 1 car on that road (other than my own) in 25 years. This year, I was passed along that narrow dirt road by 8 trucks during 3 stops, all heading to a well pad on top of the mountain - it was almost comical. ... On the plateau, the addition of Killdeer in the middle of the extensive forest was a notable effect of these new openings.”

We often see other stories, like Cecilia Riley’s from the Chinquapin, Texas route that document changes caused by reasons yet unknown:

“Sorry, nothing fun about this route – in fact it is quite boring. Reason I continue the route is to monitor the few important species that somehow, seem to be holding their own here: Northern Bobwhite and Eastern Meadowlark, both species that appear to be declining elsewhere.”

Thanks Cecilia, and we know what you mean – each of us in the office has at least one similar route ourselves and we know plenty of other folks out there who are in the same boat too. Just think of how exciting it’s going to be when we start seeing the birds return to those routes though, and we’ll certainly want to be measuring that when it happens! In the mean time, Wendy Ward offered a heartfelt note from the Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire route that reminds us of the legacy we’ve created each time we’ve run a route:

“I started doing this route with my Dad in the 1980's ... After doing this route for so many years I have memories of Dad and I seeing different birds or wildlife at just about every stop on the route. Since he passed, my daughter is now my recorder. As we were rounding a turn approaching stop 16 I told her, "Grampa and I frequently had deer cross the road here." As if on cue, a large doe bounded out of the woods and crossed the road in front of us. Another memory to store about the turnings of time and cycles of life, courtesy of our BBS route!”

We should probably be wrapping this section up now but it's just too difficult to do so without including at least a few tales of the wild things experienced by folks out on their routes. Remember that 1990's TV show called "When Animals Attack"? Well, here's 3 from that genre:

From Mark Oberle on his White Chuck, Washington route:

"Subject: Attack Grouse. I did my BBS route (White Chuck) June 11, 2013. At stop 19 (48 deg. 04.864'N, 121 deg. 23.612'W) I got out of the car at a gravel road cut where USFS had mined gravel for the road bed. It was maybe 50 feet to the nearest vegetation. Right after I opened the car door I heard a faint, low-pitched noise "whaaaoo" that almost sounded like my creek car door. Then I felt a tapping on my boot. It was a Ruffed Grouse. It made the noise and periodic tapping during the entire 3 minute BBS stop. Then I walked away from the car and it followed me down the USFS road for maybe 150 feet, clearly feeling proud of itself for having driven the giant out of its territory."

From Margaret Higbee on her Virginia, Pennsylvania route:

"At Stop 29 we had an "attack turkey." The male turkey ran from across the road at the van calling constantly; it then proceeded to walk back and forth between the front and rear tires on the driver's side looking up at Roger as it called. Fortunately, I was on the passenger side but it was still a tad unnerving."

From Stu Wilson on his Toyahvale, Texas route:

"At Stop 11, a herd of cows occupied my pull-off spot so I moved the car forward a few yards. Cows being docile creatures, I presumed this a safe distance. However, during my 3-minute count window, a pair of the cows got to jostling with each other. The jostling morphed into a rather serious head-butt contest. Foreheads locked in compression, their stumbling movements began to carry them... straight toward the car! Imagining the difficulty of describing the damages to the car rental agency, I sprinted into the driver's seat and got the car out of the cows careening path in the nick of time!"

OK, maybe just 2 more that were precarious enough but, thank goodness, didn't come to pass to earn inclusion into the section above. From Sandra Johnson on her Caballa Creek, Wyoming route:

"I'd imagine the most memorable route I had was last year...stepping out of my vehicle to conduct my count, a skunk family proceeded to cross the road just in front of my car. That was a humbling experience-thankfully, I wasn't noticed!"

From Gwen Baluss on her Harlequin Lake, Alaska route:

"Annoying brown (grizzly) bear at stop 1 would not leave even as we returned to the truck and yelled. He finally went a little ways down the road and stood sideways before heading into the brush. He was shaggy and unkempt."

Many of us in the lower 48 probably can't imagine what Gwen must have been feeling in that moment, but Dwight Platt's sentiment from his Ellinor, Kansas route is certainly more universal:

"This breeding bird survey has been an enjoyable part of my early summer for many years, almost from the beginning of this route. The only drawback has been the necessity to get up so early and drive for more than an hour to the starting point."

Ugggg, tell us about it Dwight ... you're in good company since everyone reading this memo knows your pain! The particularly great thing about those early mornings though is that each one (or at least the data that comes from them) will be used by researchers hundreds, if not thousands of times in future studies. Now if we could only get that message to a few of the lazy blackbirds on David Luneau's ULM, Arkansas route:

"In 20 years and 1000 stops prior to this year, I had seen Red-winged Blackbirds on 999 stops. On this count I did not find a Red-wing on the first two stops. Maybe they were just sleeping in this year."

We've chosen to end this year's memo on a note sent in by Ryan Tomazin from his Pleasant Grove, Pennsylvania route beings this, again, is another likely sentiment that most BBS observers can relate to:

"I could have sworn I had a Sora at stop #43. The house owner, who I'd met 2-3 years ago, came out to see what I was doing, and upon recognizing me, struck up a conversation about birds. As we talked, I heard an unmistakable Sora whinny from a heavily shaded creek bed to our right. It is a very narrow creek with no marshy area, and the bird didn't call again. Just a note. If it would have called twice, I would be busy responding to a red flag notice on my BBS route!"

In the words of the late, great Ed McMahon, "you are correct sir" – that's one premonition that had a fine likelihood of coming true! And that's a good thing when you think that it's the high standards of observers whilst in the field that gives the BBS dataset its strong scientific integrity. It's also the best way for us to honor and appreciate the efforts of earlier observers because, in so doing, the value of their investments won't get diluted. So thanks, Ryan, both for your discretion and for your example here!

And thanks to everyone who submitted notes from the field this year – as always, we wish we could have published them all. We look forward to your stories in 2014!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Besides the thousands of you in the field, we would also like to thank Alan Hedin for his outstanding help in the BBS office during the 2013 season.

Good luck & good birding in 2014!

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