



Patuxent Wildlife Research Center
North American Breeding Bird Survey
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North American Breeding Bird Survey MEMORANDUM TO COOPERATORS

SUMMER 2015

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BEHOLD, IT'S THE SURVEY'S 50th FIELD SEASON!!

This May marks the fiftieth year that thousands of talented and dedicated BBS participants like you have taken it to the streets to monitor North America's birdlife. Actually, the very first Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) participants surveyed routes in 1965 as part of a pilot effort organized by Chandler ("Chan") Robbins in Maryland and Jack Linehan in Delaware. The initial crack team of birders volunteered a weekend's time to learn to execute the procedures to a tee. That pilot field season met with overwhelming success so Chan saw to it that word of the survey's success traveled far and fast as he lined up state coordinators for the following year. The BBS officially launched in 1966 with the first official run of a route (25031 – Indiantown, Florida) commencing at 5:02 a.m. on May 24, 1966. Nearly 600 additional routes were covered in the eastern U.S. and, thanks to Tony Erskine's coordination, southeastern Canada as well. By 1967, the growing army of survey coordinators and observers had swelled to include the Great Plains states and Prairie provinces. Coverage expanded to include all of the continental U.S. and Canadian provinces by 1968, with roughly 1,850 routes distributed north of Mexico.

Thanks to your help, since its inception 50 years ago, the BBS has become widely recognized as the primary source of long-term, large-scale population data for more than 400 of North America's breeding bird species. As you know, the program continues its fruitful legacy in the U.S. and Canada under the joint coordination of staff from the USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Maryland and the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS). We have also recently expanded the program into northern Mexico in cooperation with Mexico's National Commission for the Knowledge and Use of Biodiversity (CONABIO) and we look forward to one day soon being able to say that it has become a truly, fully North American Breeding Bird Survey!

Have you ever wondered – in those pre-dawn, pre-survey hours when you're scrambling to silence your 2 a.m. alarm clock – whether your hard work and dedication has been worth the effort? The answer is, of course, a resounding, "YES"! No other single resource provides as much scientifically defensible data regarding population trends of the continent's bird populations

as the BBS. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Canadian Wildlife Service, state wildlife agencies, numerous non-governmental organizations and many others depend on the survey's annual results to assess bird conservation priorities and to tackle some of the biggest problems facing birds and the environment through science-based policy, planning, and management. Although the BBS was designed to provide a continent-wide perspective of population changes, peer-reviewed articles appear regularly in scientific journals illustrating myriad ways that BBS data are applied to questions far beyond the originally intended purpose of estimating population trends. More than 550 peer-reviewed publications feature work wherein researchers used BBS data as their primary means of answering a range of questions spanning ecology, conservation, evolutionary, and conservation biology (everything from predator-prey dynamics to climate change, range expansions to invasive species, and niche modeling to epidemiology). Thousands of other publications have cited the survey results provided by the USGS.

So a milestone like this calls for a real celebration right? That's what we think also so we're organizing a number of events that will take place in 2016 – the year when we'll actually have 50 years of data on hand to work with. More information will be forthcoming on our website but at least one major event in the works is a symposium at the North American Ornithological Conference scheduled for mid-August of 2016. Of course, you don't have to wait that long if you want to see results from the entire history of the survey so far – those are available to you right now, as always, with the click of a mouse. The most common analyses that we perform on BBS data assess geographic patterns of relative abundance, population trends, and geographic patterns in trends. These analytical results and graphical depictions, as well as the raw data behind them, are available from our website. You may also wish to check out a document that John Sauer and colleagues recently published titled “The North American Breeding Bird Survey 1966–2011: Summary Analysis and Species Accounts”. This document is freely available to the public and easily accessible at < <http://fwspubs.org/doi/full/10.3996/nafa.79.0001>>.

Many factors have contributed to the success of the BBS, but none has been more important than you and the other members of our flock who have, and continue to, collect these data. As every past and current member of the BBS staff will readily affirm, the most gratifying aspect of being in the BBS program is the privilege of working with so many talented and dedicated birders!!

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 Richard Bailey to his new role as **West Virginia** state coordinator. While we will miss his predecessor, Tom Fox, for his many years of generous service, we are pleased to see that Richard has agreed to carry the torch and we look forward to working with him into the future.

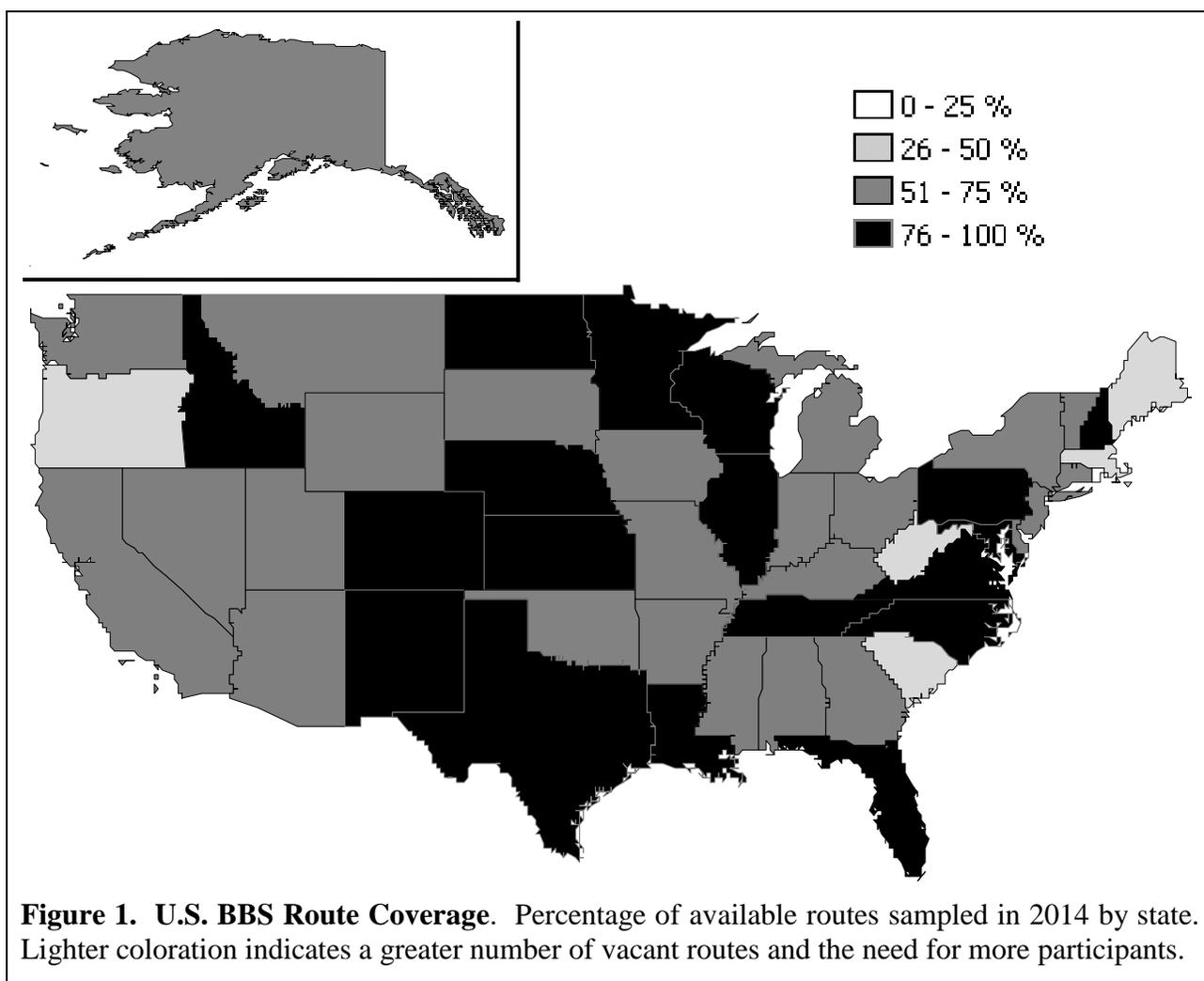
We continue our search for a state coordinator for **Delaware**. Having just 10 routes in a region with some of the mid-Atlantic's most dedicated and enthusiastic birders, Delaware represents a great opportunity for someone looking to contribute to the birding community in a new role. Additionally, the 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.

2014 ROUTE COVERAGE

Our thanks to everyone who participated in the 2014 BBS season! Data for 2992 routes have been received by the national office so far. While the numbers are not exact (a small percentage of 2014 data have yet to arrive), both Figure 1 and Table 1 below provide good indication of how route coverage in each state played out. Relative to last year's map, two states, Florida and Virginia, advanced to the 76-100% coverage bracket. Erin Ragheb worked with the committed cadre of Florida observers to cover 5 more routes in 2014 than they had in 2013. Congratulations are also in order for observers in Arkansas, Minnesota, and Nebraska plus their coordinators (Dick Baxter, Bob Janssen, and Joel Jorgensen, respectively) for achieving similar increases in their states too.

A couple of years ago we worried that we might run out of ways to congratulate Sandy Williams and New Mexico's elite observer squad who routinely survey 97% or more of the state's routes. They met the mark again in 2014 and that's just an incredible nod to their hard work! The same must be said for the exceptional observers in Maryland who once again achieved 98% coverage in their state – an especially impressive feat when considering the high car counts that many routes there contend with. Not to be overshadowed, the dedicated teams of observers in Nebraska, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin (led by Joel Jorgensen, Dan Brauning, and Mark Korducki, respectively) also maintained another year with state coverage levels above 90%!

Nineteen states experienced a coverage loss of more than five routes in 2014. Check and see if your state was one of them by comparing the “sampled in” columns from 2014 and 2013 in Table 1. Additional observer assistance is needed in Alaska, California, New York, Oklahoma, and Wyoming to overcome recent coverage losses that have reduced sampling efforts to near or below the 60% mark. Observers are also sorely needed in Maine, Massachusetts, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, and West Virginia where 50% or fewer routes were covered in 2014 (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 2014 BBS season, 122 participants have achieved the following BBS milestones (*recipients appear in alphabetical order grouped by award category*):

10-years — 56 participants:

Brandon Anderson, Renee Baade, Mark Beebe, Jeff Bolsinger, Virginia Clark, Andrew Dasinger, Jay Davis, Colin Dillingham, Marc Ealy, Melissa Easley, Andrew Forbes, Scott Freidhof, John Froystad, William Gruenbaum, Leroy Harp, Gjon Hazard, Anthony Hewetson, Bill Hintze, Sandy Johnson, Erik Johnson, Chris Kelly, Adam Kent, Joseph Kersey, Steve Kupcho, Marian Lichtler, Wes Mattox, Donna Mitchell, Daniel Moss, Melvin Nenneman, Heidi Newsome, Chip O'Leary, Bridget Olson, Tracey Ostheimer, Bill Ostheimer, Jim Ozier, Sharon Petzinger, Becky Piehler, David Powell, Peter Pyle, Joann Ringelstetter, Robert Ringler, Jeremy Roberts, Jayne Rushin, Charles Scheim, Daniel Scheiman, Jessie Schillaci, John Sease, Steve Sjogren, Byron Stone, Vashti Supplee, Jean Trent, Paul Wackenhut, Lynn Willcockson, Alan Williams, Anthony Wright, Brenda Zaun

20-years — 37 participants:

Benjamin Archer, Steve Betchkal, Denise Bohon, Lynn Braband, Happy Chambers, Richard Connors, Steven Cox, Mike Fialkovich, Charles Fuller, Bill Griffin, Lisa Hamilton, Mark Hoffman, Henry Horvat, David Jickling, Robert Keiffer, Robin Leong, Thomas Lerczak, Richard Lewis, Michael Manetz, John Maresh, Terry Mcneely, Raymond Meyer, Kenny Nichols, Karen Osborne, Frank Palmer, Kim Potter, Peter Quincy, Larry Rizzo, Rex Sallabanks, John Sauer, David Smith, Dale Stahlecker, David Suddjian, Cris Tomlinson, Charles Vaughn, Harold Ward, Alan Wight

30-years — 11 participants:

Wayne Bell, Robert Culbertson, Joyce Duncan, Randy Hoffman, Wayne Mason, David Mehlman, Harold Reeve, Brian Rollfinke, Sharon Sarappo, Colleen Sweeney, Steven Wilson

40-years — 1 participant:

Wayne Harper

50 Routes sampled — 17 participants:

Jennifer Adams, Robert Bastarache, Betsy Brown, Lisa Hamilton, Anthony Hewetson, Greg Hiatt, Laura Hubers, Danny Kassebaum, Paul Kittle, David Lambeth, Daniel Larson, Michael Lilga, Keith McMullen, Kenny Nichols, Adam Rich, Dan Twedt, Susan Wise-Eagle

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 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 entreat 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. Often times a theme emerges from these stories and this year, in light of the survey's upcoming 50th anniversary, we thought it would be fun to select a suite of 2014 stories that capture some of the common personality traits that we figure all observers must share.

The Spirit of Adventure. We have to forgive the unacquainted when they beg the question, "where's the adventure in driving along a road, stopping frequently to look at birds?" But as all of us observers have learned, adventure is the excitement of not knowing what's going to happen next, and you don't have to jump out of a plane for that! If nothing else, one thing that all BBS observers have in common is the ability to see and celebrate the adventure of life in the everyday, as exemplified by Celeste Andresen's notes from the Cutter route in AZ:

"As I walked around camp at 4 a.m. with my headlamp, I saw the eye-shine of scorpions! How fast they dashed into their holes. We encountered a big, wide-girthed Western Diamondback in the middle of the road, warming himself. I took my snake holder, ready to move him off the road, but his size was a deterrent, and we just hoped he moved off the road before anyone else encountered him ... We celebrated our 12th wedding anniversary by doing this BBS! Jim's not a birder, but he's an accurate recorder, and great company. He said that was his anniversary gift to me!"

Being Open to the Unexpected. How could running the same route during the same time of year, year after year, be considered anything but boring? Easy. Whether it's birds or wild and

enigmatic animals, like humans, it's clear from the stories we receive that folks are open to seeing new and sometimes surprising things and so, naturally, they do:

From Gwen Brewer on her Pomonkey, MD route:

“We do not expect to get new birds for our county list doing the BBS route, but that is just what happened this year with the appearance of a male Mourning Warbler! He made certain we would not miss him by singing as soon as we exited the car at the stop. He continued to sing a few more times then moved on, so we felt especially lucky that we hit stop 46 on the day and time that we did! It shows that you never know what you will find when you do your route.”

From Daniel Erdely on his Pleasant Grove 2 route in FL:

“Two passing motorists stopped to ask if we needed help. We saw a chihuahua wearing pink goggles, riding in a carrier on the back seat of a motorcycle!”

From Dale Herter on his Ronald, WA route:

“At stop 39 I got out of the car and thought there was a jet going up the valley at a low altitude, but I also heard several loud booms across the valley. Apparently a sheer cliff had just given way on the craggy summit of Davis Peak, and I watched car-sized boulders tumbling down the mountainside. I was not in any danger from my location but it still gave me sense of panic for a few moments. Geology in action, impressive!”

Disciplined Time Management. To be sure, the brisk pace of a BBS survey doesn't make for the kind of birding you might otherwise enjoy on a leisurely stroll through the park. It takes principled effort to pass by interesting facets of nature that you'd be inclined to stop and explore under other circumstances. Ken Blankenship demonstrated a process familiar to all of us on his Weber, GA route this past year:

“Today I wanted to see how quickly but also ACCURATELY and SAFELY I could run a BBS Route. Crunching the numbers ahead of time reveals that following protocol precludes finishing any earlier than 9:40am, and even that would be a stretch. Thus, I set my goal for 10:00am: No dawdling, all business, swift but safe moves from stop to stop, mechanical and quick movements out of the car, start the timer, record the data, jump back in the car... GO! It was pretty fun. In the end, solid science is the highest priority over a random personal challenge, but I did finish at a respectable 10:30am. Certain stops simply deserve the extra attention, relevant notes, that one species that called just once during the window that is worth waiting that extra minute to confirm when it calls again, etc. Great morning of citizen science on-the-fly!”

Overcoming Obstacles with Humor and Good-nature. As with all things in life, if it's a meaningful endeavor, it's likely to come with challenges. Whether that is a flat tire, a closed bridge, a data entry issue, or even a chatterbox of a bird, we've seen over and over that BBS observers roll with the punches in the best possible way:

From Thomas Hall on his Deadman Rd., CO route:

“I thought upper gate on Deadman Pass might be open - not. Had to get out mtn. bike and trek the last 3 miles. Adds about 6 minutes to each stop (45-50). Not bad for an old #art -

a real piece of work - some old guy tootling along on his bike. Bears sit and watch from afar with a grin, I can tell. I do like the ride out since I don't have to peddle.”

From Grace Kiltie on her Belmore, FL route:

“I was tempted to file an "excessive noise" note for Stop 1. About 30 seconds into the 3-min census, I was dive-bombed by two Chuck-wills Widows. I had been standing in place for about 5 minutes beforehand unmolested. They both flew around me a couple of times each, getting quite close. I ducked at one point. Then one took up a perch about 10 feet behind me and proceeded to sing loudly for the rest of the 3 minutes. I heard little else for the remainder of the time.”

Adapting to Local Conditions. Humans are distributed widely across this great continent and so too are the many BBS routes that they cover. We are constantly amazed in reading about the resourcefulness and dedication of observers when it comes to surveying routes safely and effectively in hot deserts, rugged mountains, etc. – even if, as Cheyenne Szydlo mentioned from AZ’s Sawmill route, it’s not always the physical climate that needs adapting to:

“Since we knew we would be deep in Navajo country on poor roads, we rented a high-clearance vehicle for the survey. We ended up getting a sleek Volkswagen Touareg with California plates --not the car we had in mind. Nothing says clueless & lost like a sleek car, a California plate and bad roads deep in Navajo Nation. Throughout the survey we were gawked at by passersby, the most bewildered looks coming while we were surveying the sewage ponds. Many pulled over to find out just how lost we were. Nobody believed we were from Flagstaff doing a bird survey. Next year we are getting a rental with Arizona plates!”

Making Friends in the Local Community. We receive more notes about conversing with locals than any other topic. We have been inspired by the many friendly, informative, and courteous ways that observers represent the survey to outsiders, especially in occasionally burdensome situations. Dawn Garcia shared a real-life story of doing just that (which could probably also serve as a fitting fable) on her Meadow Valley, CA route:

“At one of our stops we were greeted by at least 5 different dogs barking from various homes. All of a sudden we see one very large dog coming at us, but he was so goofy looking we felt safe and soon he was sniffing our shoes and wagging his tail with his big tongue lolling off the side of his jaws. Soon 2 other barking dogs came to us, first looking rather formidable and then once they saw their goofy neighbor they too wagged their tails. All got petted, which was what they wanted, and then went on their way.”

Scholarship and Curiosity About Birds. Members of our flock are excited about learning and that’s what drove us BBS observers beyond simply matching birds to guidebook pictures and sounds to recordings in the first place. Observers know how critical it is to understand where, when, and why birds are located where they are and this is reflected in notes about novel patterns that may not be known yet. Hugh Kingery, for instance, offered just such a thing from CO’s Elbert route:

“Black-capped chickadees (I think) continue to sing their unique, Black Forest accent, 'three blind mice.' We noted this at Stops 20, 22, 24, & 30. In other years we have heard this dependably at many stops. The "Black Forest" exists as a partially isolated habitat separated from the main part of the Rocky Mtns -- sort of an island. Some graduate student

could find material for a study, and compare to Kroodsmas's Nantucket birds that have their unique accent.”

Commitment to the Cause. As if waking up early weren't trial enough, BBS observers show time and time again just how important we all feel it is to conduct our surveys. Lee Pfanmuller's note from MN from this past, exceptionally wet, year sure is testament to that:

“To say it was difficult to find a good weather day to conduct our two Minnesota BBS routes (Floodwood and Evergreen) this year would be an understatement. The wettest June on record since 1874 (!!!) presented all sorts of challenges. When it finally looked like there might be two days in a row with less than a 50% chance of rain we decided to make a go of it. Unfortunately, the day before leaving we received nearly 5 inches of rain in Minneapolis! Because the ground was already saturated, by noon the water began seeping into our basement and by Friday morning nearly the entire basement was under water, despite our constant efforts to shop-vac it up. Because both of our routes are nearly 4 hours away we needed to be gone for nearly 40 hours to complete both routes and we feared what we would return to. So we stayed up till midnight on Friday working to remove the water and then our youngest daughter came home from Madison and helped assume our duties while we left just in time to make our 4:58 am start time on our first route, Evergreen. We had an absolutely gorgeous day and were feeling pretty lucky ... we were able to complete the Floodwood route without incident and return home to a basement where water continued to come in for 2 more days! Ahh, if the birds only knew!”

A Sense of Pride for the Task at Hand. For us observers, a route path certainly grows closer to heart than any simple old stretch of road. And thank goodness for it because the BBS isn't one organization's survey but rather it belongs to us all, collectively, and keeping it going requires that we embrace a sense of ownership. Each of our routes has something unique to be proud of but, as Laurel Devaney points out from St. Mary's, AK, sometimes one species takes the cake:

“We feel proud and honored to once again be able to conduct the only BBS in North America that has Bristle-Thighed Curlews on it!”

Investing in the Future. If there's one thing that decades of stories have spelled out for us it's that, at the core, we all want to see a bright future for us and the birds that we count and we're willing to contribute to a database that'll outlive us all so that future generations will have the tools needed to measure our progress. Thanks to Robert and Ryan Keiffer on the Laytonville, CA route for demonstrating the kind of legacy building that will help ensure success in years ahead:

“This was the first time that I was able to run the route with my son, Ryan Keiffer, who is now out of college and an avid local birder. He is really getting the calls down!”

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 2015!

Good luck & good birding in 2015!

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