



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

### SUMMER 2017

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#### NEW OBSERVERS WELCOME

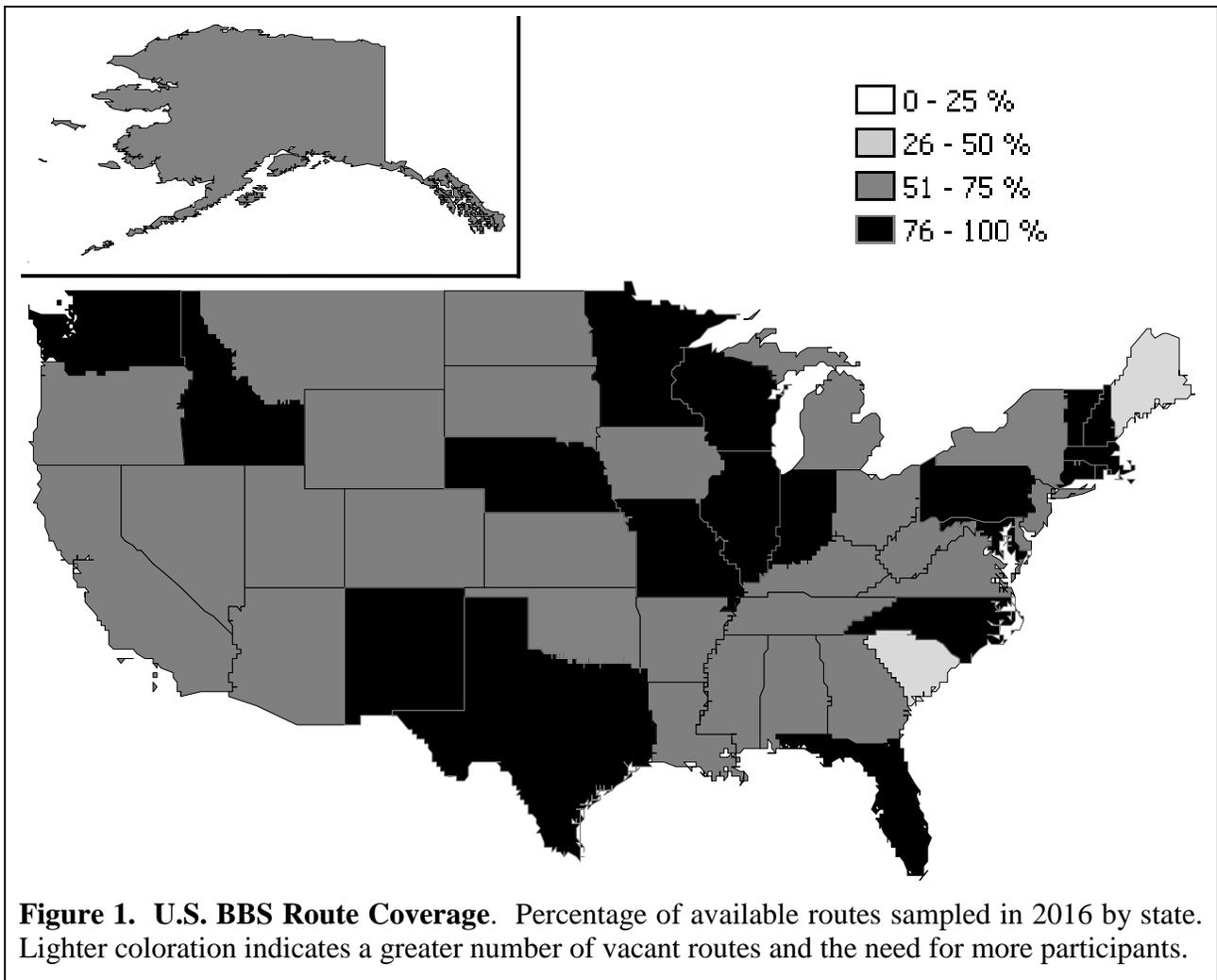
If this is your first year, thank you for joining the flock of thousands who make the BBS a success! Through your efforts and those of your peers, federal, state, and local conservation agencies have reliable bird population information on which to base sound conservation and management decisions. We 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](http://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) Read the Instructions for Conducting the North American Breeding Bird Survey ([www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbs/participate/instructions.html](http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbs/participate/instructions.html)). Pay close attention to the methods and observer requirements, as well as survey dates and start times listed on data forms. Now log into the online data entry system and complete the BBS Methodology Training program and final review. We can’t use your data if you do not.
- 2) Scout your route before the actual survey day to avoid unexpected delays.
- 3) Submit your data electronically for faster feedback.
- 4) Return your maps and paper data in a timely manner at the end of each season.
- 5) HAVE FUN!

## 2016 ROUTE COVERAGE

Our thanks to everyone who participated in the 2016 BBS season! Data from 3096 routes have been received by the national office so far. While the numbers are not exact (a small percentage of 2016 data have yet to arrive), both Figure 1 and Table 1 below provide a good indication of how route coverage in each state played out. As always, please encourage your qualified birder friends to migrate over to your state coordinator to lend a wing. Coordinator contact information for all states is conveniently located on our web site at 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!



## **TRIBUTE TO CHANDLER S. ROBBINS (1918 – 2017), BBS PROGENITOR**

An indefatigable avian admirer, unrelenting conservationist and world-class scientist, Chan Robbins worked throughout his lifetime to improve our scientific understanding of birds and to train and engage birders across the globe. Even at 98 years old, Chan remained active in avian science and conservation providing a keynote presentation at the BBS 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Symposium during the 2016 North American Ornithological Conference held in Washington, D.C. Chan's mastery of ornithology, statistics and social science, however, is nowhere more evident than in the North American Breeding Bird Survey program that he initiated in 1966. In it he balanced the competing imperatives of scientific rigor and cultural mores to form a bird monitoring program which has endured more than five decades, and now serves as the quantitative foundation for North American bird conservation! At a time when non-game biology programs were virtually unheard of, few thought the BBS would succeed. Even Eleanor, Chan's wife and most ardent supporter, voiced her doubt during the Survey's formative years as did most of his colleagues within the scientific community. Nevertheless Chan's persistence and planning, including 15 years of observations gathered from seven states and provinces, paid off. The BBS has been hugely successful enriching us all by providing the data needed to more clearly see large-scale patterns in avian population change, and facilitating better stewardship of our natural environment upon which birds and humans alike depend. In gratitude and with fond memories, we thank Chandler S. Robbins for his foresight, creativity and generosity in developing the BBS, and as Chan was always quick to recognize, we especially thank all of you who have shared in his vision through participation in the BBS!

To learn more about Chan's scientific and conservation legacy, please visit the following sites:

- [www.usgs.gov/news/chandler-robbins-inspired-generations-scientists-and-birders-1918-2017](http://www.usgs.gov/news/chandler-robbins-inspired-generations-scientists-and-birders-1918-2017)
- [www.pwrc.usgs.gov/BBS/bbsnews/Pubs/Birding-Article.pdf](http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/BBS/bbsnews/Pubs/Birding-Article.pdf)
- [www.audubon.org/news/in-memory-chandler-s-robbins](http://www.audubon.org/news/in-memory-chandler-s-robbins)

## **COORDINATOR UPDATES**

We welcome Jim Johnson and Laura McDuffie to their new roles as co-coordinators of the great BIG state of **Alaska**. Steve Matsuoka had single-handedly managed the state for many years and so it's not an understatement when we say that we feel equally BIG appreciation for Steve's generous service. In his stead, we are excited and looking forward to building a long and prosperous relationship with Jim and Laura.

After 30 years of working with observers to keep **Montana** routes filled, we were sad to learn that Dan Sullivan was going to pass on the coordination torch, though he will continue to run routes down Utah way. Nevertheless, we are excited to welcome Elizabeth Madden into her new role as state coordinator! We look forward to working with Elizabeth well into the future.

Paul Adamus, coordinator of **Oregon's** breeding bird atlas project, has graciously offered to accept the BBS coordinator baton from Harry Nehls. Harry ran his first Oregon BBS route back in 1968 and he's been working with the state's observers to keep routes filled for many decades! That makes it all the more difficult for us to put aside our selfish yearnings to keep him on and, instead, wish him the best of some well-deserved time for birding and travel. Harry leaves big shoes behind but Paul's the ideal man for the job and we're thrilled to have him at that post.

## **ROUTE PROBLEMS**

As 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](mailto: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 0.10 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.

## **PARTICIPANT MILESTONES**

With the completion of the 2016 BBS season, 142 participants have achieved the following BBS milestones (*recipients appear in alphabetical order grouped by award category*):

### **10-years — 71 participants:**

Susan Allerton, Mark Armstrong, James Beatty, Lisa Belmonte, Jim Berry, Milt Blomberg, Ray Boehmer, Frances Cassirer, Eric Clough, Lyann Comrack, Charlotte Corkran, Judy Dorsey, Gary Eslinger, Matt Etterson, Bruce Fall, Frank Farrell, Linda Fink, Mark Fisher, Rob Fowler, Gregg Goodrich, Dave Grosshuesch, Deborah Grove, Mace Hack, Jed Hertz, Robert Hodorff, Mark Huff, Amy Igl, Wilma Jarrell, William Jensen, Margaret Jewett, Thomas Johnson, Silka Kempema, Laura La Valley, Sherry Leslie, Jeffrey Lewis, Doug Linstruth, Fern Linton, Joseph Lipar, Peter Lusardi, Ron Mabie, Geoff Malosh, Mark Mayfield, Tom Mcconnell, Donald Mcgowan, Cecelia Overby, Wayne Patterson, Randy Prachar, Caleb Putnam, Catherine Rideout, Ruth Riegel, Adam Rohnke, Becky Rosamond, Penny Rose, Karl Ruprecht, Ann Russ, Joey Russell, Joel Sauder, Mark Schmidtbauer, Kathy Schwery, William Shelmerdine, Laurie Spangler, Denise Taylor, John Tirpak, Ryan Tomazin, Adam Troyer, Ed Van Otteren, Nadine Varner, Jennifer Vieth, Glenn Williams, Dana Wright, Gary Zenitsky

### **20-years — 33 participants:**

William Alexander, David Allen, Betsy Beneke, Robert Birrer, James Biser, Bernie Daniel, Donald Dann, Mary Beth Dillon, Steven Faccio, Jeanne Fair, Robert Fiehweg, Mark Flippo, James Frank, Paul Gardner, Bryan Glover, Gregory Hanisek, Malcolm Hodges, Roy Ickes, Ron Ketchum, P. Lynne Landon, Peter Martin, Gerry Morgan, Peter Newbern, Perry Nugent, Keith Pardieck, Diane Potter, Richard Preston, Larry Raymond, Bruce Seppi, Clyde Sorenson, Fred Von Mechow, Dave Williams, Chester Winegarner

**30-years — 12 participants:**

Richard Boyd, David Cleary, James Cox, Lucinda Haggas, Paul Kittle, Julia Krebs, Stephen Mirick, Paul Raney, Jr., Terence Schiefer, Susan Staats, Judith Ward, Sartor Williams

**40-years — 9 participants:**

Ronald Annelin, Richard Davis, Deanna Dawson, Steven Hedges, Daniel Jacobson, Charles Nicholson, Philip Shelton, Robert Spahn, Carl Tomoff

**50-Routes sampled — 17 participants:**

Peter Beck, Samuel Cooper, Charles Debetaz, Robert Doster, Merrill Frydendall, Paul Gardner, Kathy Granillo, Leroy Harrison, Jr., David Junkin, David Mehlman, Grace Nutting, Susan Patla, Linden Piest, Peter Quincy, Susan Reel, Eileen Stukel, Stu 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. We value and appreciate contributions made by assistants on routes but, because our database only stores observer numbers, we are unable to calculate their years of service. 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!**

**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 wealth of stories ranging from funny tales of judgmental moose and terrifying skunk encounters to the more serious side of what the birds are experiencing along our routes. Here we have whittled away at the pile and share some of our favorites.

Marvin Elliott wrote about his experience with the dreaded early morning wake up for the W Rutland, VT route:

*“When getting up in the morning to run this survey I always ask myself why am I doing this? The answer comes quickly. At stop one with partially cloudy skies and a headlamp to record the data, the sound of bird life comes rushing to my ears. The sound of a new day can only be experienced under conditions like that. If all of those birds are happy to be alive then so am I. Then once again I am glad I volunteered.”*

How true! Greeting the day with the birds must top the list of reasons we run routes. We get to see a unique slice of the world most people never experience. And as we build a relationship with our routes over the years, the excitement felt over a rarely detected bird is hard to describe -- even more so if the habitat is less than optimal for the species. Duane Weber on his Custer, SD route had one such experience this year:

*“The ‘bird of the day’ was a Bobolink. This route would NOT be considered very*

*good Bobolink habitat as the meadows are privately owned, small (many under 10 acres) and most are grazed and/or hayed annually, not to mention that we are at over 5000 ft. elevation surrounded by Ponderosa pine forest and rock. It has been several years since I have seen Bobolink in the Custer area. I heard him first, as he sang continuously during the survey period, but it must have taken most of a minute for my brain to sort out what I was hearing. I turned toward the un-cut hay meadow and in the very geographic middle of the 5 acre plot perched the male on a sprig of brome grass, singing for all he was worth. The first "skunk bird" I have seen in some years. Unfortunately this meadow will likely be cut for hay in the next few weeks making this little meadow a 'sink' instead of a source for more Bobolinks."*

While it is hard to be excited about these habitat sinks, one has to remain optimistic that not all of these nesting attempts are doomed to fail. Geoffrey Lebaron, on his Chesterfield, MA route tells of something most participants would love to experience:

*"Stop 34 is always an interesting one; on a corner on the outskirts of a small town, surrounded by woods neighboring a bog on one side and a lovely, mature yard on the other side; there is a wonderful diversity of species possible at this stop. Some years back we had a female Evening Grosbeak picking up grit in a dried puddle right where we park the car, and this year in mid-survey at this stop three Evening Grosbeaks flew over our heads, circled around, and landed at our feet. Clearly in their minds we had parked the car in the wrong spot. The male and two females hopped repeatedly around the car -- often right at our feet -- in search of the perfect grit, making it challenging to pay attention to all the other birds during the survey. The grosbeaks eventually got what they needed, and when the male took off he nearly flew into my head as he departed the scene. Sometimes "Messages from the Birds" are literally "in your face!"*

How exciting to be so close to those Evening Grosbeaks! Other close encounters of the avian kind include this from, Chris Kelly's French Broad River, NC route during which a Broad-winged Hawk received its share of ire from the other locals:

*"At stop 27: Broad-winged Hawk was perched on a shrub on the rock face opposite my parking spot. It flew and was pursued by a male Rose-breasted Grosbeak and two robins while 2 Northern Rough-winged Swallows swooped behind them, less direct in taking on the hawk. Moments later, a small flock of Red Crossbills flew overhead, calling."*

It seems word travels fast and in an act of avian chest-thumping by our smallest Buteo, a broad-winged seemed to try to cement its reputation for toughness by going after one of the big guys of the forest on the Bardwell 2, KY route as told by Bill Liskowsky:

*"Probably one of our favorite highlights in 35+ years of BBS routes occurred on Stop 15 – a Broad-winged Hawk whistled then harassed a Barred Owl into flying over while a Mississippi Kite perched in a snag next to the road and watched!"*

The kite was undoubtedly enjoying the show too, and glad not to be on the receiving end of that Buteo's bravado. Further west, an Eastern Kingbird made sure to point out that it ruled the air by taking on our most widespread Buteo on Jason Paulios' West Liberty, Iowa route:

*"... Later I watched an adult Red-tailed Hawk soar low past me at a stop, on*

*his upper back was a perched an Eastern Kingbird diligently pecking at the hawk's head."*

As with a few other bird species, it's a good thing kingbirds aren't the size of chickens! As hard as it is to believe to members of our flock, there are some people who are less than thrilled with groups of birds. Kelly Preheim's experience on the Tripp, SD route would certainly have set those folks' hearts racing:

*"While standing on the bridge over the James River, I thought to myself, "Why aren't there many Cliff Swallows this year?" Then I sneezed and I was surprised as 150+ Cliff Swallows rose up from below the bridge where I was standing. They flew around me as I tried to estimate how many there were. I guess that question was answered!"*

These are always a challenge to enumerate, but imagine trying to count any birds with flocks of nearly bird-sized mosquitoes present! Judy Kestner had to do just that on her Petronila, TX route:

*"This area has received about 10 inches of rain over the average resulting in MOSQUITOES. I typed that in all caps because the mosquitoes are that size. As the morning wore on their numbers decreased and the droning in my ears diminished, allowing a more accurate bird count! The standing rain water also has brought Fulvous Whistling Ducks, so I can't complain too much."*

At least the whistling ducks helped distract from the Gallinippers! And Judy wasn't alone, mosquito war tales arrived from many quarters fed by the heavy spring rains. Water brings other hazards however; and while (thankfully) nothing happened, Judy Williams' tale from the Birch Lake, AK route reminds us to keep an eye out for charismatic megafauna:

*"This was a year for moose on the Birch Lake Breeding Bird Survey route! Both my Husband-assistant and I had to keep an eye on nearby moose during count periods. There were 2 at stop #1, 1 near stop #8, 2 near stop #9, 1 at stop #21, and 1 at stop #45. They were all aware of us. Fortunately, we were in open areas where I wasn't blocking their movement, and we saw no cow/calf situation. None threatened, but one in particular continued to feed closer and closer to me. We have a healthy respect for these megafauna."*

Also from Alaska – or should we say, only in Alaska -- Carol McIntyre had to negotiate a unique road hazard on the Savage route:

*"I had a slight delay near the end of the route due to a large Grizzly Bear walking down the road directly in front of me. I had to wait for several minutes at some of the last stops so the bear could keep walking in front of me. The bear eventually walked off the road and I could pass without delay."*

On the plus side, I bet not many folks stopped to see what Carol was up to parked on the side of the road! Often stranger than the animal encounters are the unexpected human ones. Typically when we get comments about flute music it is in reference to a *Catharus* thrush, not so for David Smith on the Flagstaff, AZ route:

*"The flute serenade at stop 17 was different. There was no vehicle parked in the area. There was just flute music wafting through the air."*

We agree, David; that is different (though I imagine a bit soothing as well)! Our final story for the year comes from Thomas Hall on his Yampa, CO route. It seems at some point while running our routes we all have to do a double take (or two):

*“I was overlooking a pasture counting birds at stop 49. Several Red-winged Blackbird males were reacting to something in this field. I could see at a couple hundred yards that there were two metal-looking objects protruding from the ground. I thought it odd that the blackbirds would be reacting to those until they started to move. I thought, “What the heck!” I put my binocs up to see that they were the heads of two Sandhill Cranes wading through grass that, rather than the six inches tall as I was imagining, was three feet tall. The cranes were very watchful, appearing to protect a couple of unseen colts lost in the jungle below them.”*

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 2017!

*Good luck & good birding in 2017!*

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