

Patuxent Wildlife Research Center

Breeding Bird Survey
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Memorandum to Cooperators

SUMMER 2007

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ONLINE DATA ENTRY IMPROVEMENTS

Last year's release of the new BBS data entry portal was met by overwhelmingly positive response from BBS observers. As to be expected though, a number of bugs did turn up that required addressing and, with the help of patient and dedicated observers, we also identified a number of areas where further improvements could be made.

In the intervening year we have dedicated much time and effort to working out the bugs and towards incorporating suggestions for making the system more functionally smooth and user-friendly. This includes resolving previous issues relating to excessive noise values, species totals on review pages, the pasting of route coordinates from external documents, etc.

It should be noted that a number of personal computer settings outside of the BBS can also interfere with the way that web content, such as BBS web pages, are displayed and function on individual computers. We have tried to accommodate as many of these settings as possible but request that observers 1) use one of the common contemporary internet browsers (standard on most computers released after 2002) and 2) disable their personal pop-up blockers once logged into the BBS data entry system.

We encourage all observers to use the web entry portal to enter their 2007 bird data and manage their stop descriptions/coordinates online for this eliminates the costly and time consuming steps of scanning data sheets and updating paper map information in the office. We appreciate the time, effort, and patience devoted to helping to improve our system and look forward to making further improvements to ensure that the BBS experience is a fun and productive one for all.

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. For instance, there you can find and download previous years' species lists for your route, see where neighboring routes are located in the state, map the location of species found in the region using the NBII mapping application, and view trend maps for particular species. If you would like, we can also loan you bird song CD's and other resources to help you brush up on you identification skills during the winter months. You can find our contact information both online and at the close of this Memorandum and we are happy to accommodate requests whenever we can. If you have any questions or problems regarding the BBS, please do not hesitate to contact your state coordinator or us here at the national office.

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

- 1) Complete the BBS Methodology Training program and the final review.
We can not use your data if you do not.
- 2) Scout your route before the actual survey day to avoid unexpected delays.
- 3) Pay close attention to the instructions regarding survey timing and to the specific route start time indicated on your data form(s).
- 4) Submit your data electronically for faster feedback.
- 5) Return your completed forms and maps in a timely manner at the end of each season.
- 6) HAVE FUN -- take a friend, take pictures, or mentor a fledgling birder.

Thank you again for participating and we look forward to hearing about your adventures with the BBS.

BBS HIT HARD BY LOW MAP RETURN

Many observers believe that they are helping the BBS by retaining their maps since they intend to survey their route(s) in the following year. While we certainly appreciate this consideration, the BBS does not have the means or the resources to distinguish and track observers who wish to help us from those who have lost a map or need a replacement. To ensure that all observers receive necessary materials for the upcoming field season, the BBS must err on the side of caution and annually prepare a complete packet of materials for all observers. In cases where maps were not returned, the staff must retrieve file copies of those maps from archives, produce copies, and then locate and mark original route paths.

With well over 30% of maps not returned in the 2006 BBS season, weeks of critical time were expended in preparing maps for the 2007 field season – many of which did not likely need replacing. In order to reduce this burden to the BBS program and to keep the permanent map record up to date we need you to return your maps with your data in a timely manner at the end of each season. We thank you for your cooperation!

RECENT MEETINGS & PLANNING

1) North American Ornithological Conference IV – *Veracruz, Mexico – October 3-7, 2006.*

- Establishing A Mexican Breeding Bird Survey Program Workshop –
A workshop to initiate advanced discussion and to begin laying the foundation for the implementation of a Mexico BBS program by 2010. The workshop was oriented towards using examples from the U.S. and Canada to illustrate the application of BBS population trend data to avian conservation in Mexico, discussing responsibility structure and participation expectations.
- Oral and poster presentations –
BBS staff participated in the scientific sessions giving three presentations, including one in a ‘Monitoring Networks of the Americas’ symposium.

2) Patuxent Wildlife Research Center Biennial Science Meeting – *MD – October 11-13, 2006.*

- Chan Robbins Symposium Part 1: Breeding Bird Survey
A special session of presentations focusing on the value of the BBS and Chan’s origination of and contribution to it. Topics included: “BBS: The Canadian Wildlife Service perspective”, “The modern BBS and its evolution over the past 20 years”, “BBS data application: Trends and other lessons learned”, etc.

Comprehensive meeting minutes and lists of other products from these events can be found at:
<http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbs/bbsnews/MeetingProducts/index.html>

BBS MEXICO EXPANSION

Following wrap-up discussions conducted in late October, the North American Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) announces the success of its initiatory step toward creating a Mexican BBS program. As the primary source of large-scale, long-term population data for over 400 of North America’s breeding bird species, the BBS is the Federal government’s flagship wildlife surveillance program. This collaborative effort between the USGS and the Canadian Wildlife Service, and headquartered at the USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, has been identifying species at risk and informing bird conservation planning efforts of U.S. and Canadian resource management agencies for over 40 years. To date, the ability of the BBS to document the status of species whose ranges extend into Mexico has been limited to the U.S. portions of these species’ ranges. Now, on the heels of a comprehensive strategic planning effort, the BBS is embarking on a course aimed at implementing a Mexican BBS program by 2010. This initiative has been enabled by a productive dialogue with Mexican government biologists and by the promising results of a 3-year feasibility study. On October 3, BBS staff kicked off this initiative by conducting a ‘Mexico BBS Expansion’ workshop in Veracruz, Mexico, with the collaboration of the Canadian Wildlife Service and Mexico’s Comisión Nacional para el Conocimiento y Uso de la Biodiversidad. Held in conjunction with the North American Ornithological Congress, this workshop was very well attended by potential Mexican participants. It introduced them to the great potential of the BBS for improving coverage of shared avian species as well as for tracking populations of their own endemic species, many of which may be especially vulnerable to environmental degradation. By emphasizing expansion through the enlisting of trained Mexicans, the workshop was a significant step toward making the BBS a truly North American program.

COORDINATOR UPDATES

We welcome Nathan Stricker in Ohio, Dan Twedt in Mississippi, Mike Delany in Florida, and Eric Hynes in Maine to their new roles as BBS state coordinators. We look forward to long and productive relationships with them and, for their generous service, we thank their respective predecessors, Scott Hull, David Watts, Karen Whitney, and Judy Walker.

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Current state coordinator contact information is available on the BBS web page via the “Contact Us” link.

ROUTE TROUBLES?

To be sure, routes in increasingly urbanized areas tend to be less appealing for birders than those in more protected and pristine areas. Considering that routes with dwindling natural habitat provide some of the strongest indications of landscape level change though, such routes are a critical component of the descriptive power of the BBS. That said, when it comes to addressing route problems, the BBS office often finds itself between a rock and hard place. On the one hand, the value of the BBS comes from both the longevity of its existing routes and through its non-biased sampling of both pristine and less than pristine areas. On the other hand, safety is the highest priority in the BBS, and the staff would also like to maintain a fun as well as safe experience for all observers.

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. Due to the large volume of requests and our low staffing, we have not been able to resolve all requests each year. We are working on solving this but, in the mean time, we ask that observers who have submitted route problems but who have not received a reply yet please review section 13 of the BBS instruction booklet before resubmitting. 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 significantly less. In special cases where significant safety hazards are imminent and immediate, please call the BBS office directly (301-497-5753) for a route solution. When reporting the remainder of cases using the comment form, please provide a contact number or email along with a description of the route problem in as much detail and as succinctly as possible.

TOP 2 MOST FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS OF 2006

Why Don't All Of The Species That I Regularly Record Appear On My Data Sheets?

Usability and printing and mailing costs are all concerns that factor into the design of a good functional data sheet. Here at the BBS we've managed to limit our data sheets to twelve pages by using efficiencies such as apportioning 5 stops to each page. In a similar vane, for the species list, we employ an algorithm that selects for printing the 65 most abundant and numerous contemporary breeding species, leaving 9 empty spaces for less regularly occurring species.

My Route Species List Is Declining, Can We Shift My Route To A More Productive Area?

Unlike other familiar bird 'counts' with a goal of counting all members of a population, the BBS is designed specifically to 'survey' bird populations. The word "survey" describes a method of collecting information from a sample of individuals in a population. In the BBS the sampling tool is the route. As with other bona fide surveys, it is important that samples be collected such that no one portion of a population has any better chance of being sampled than any other. In the case of the BBS this means that routes are selected and placed in the landscape randomly with respect to habitat quality and species richness.

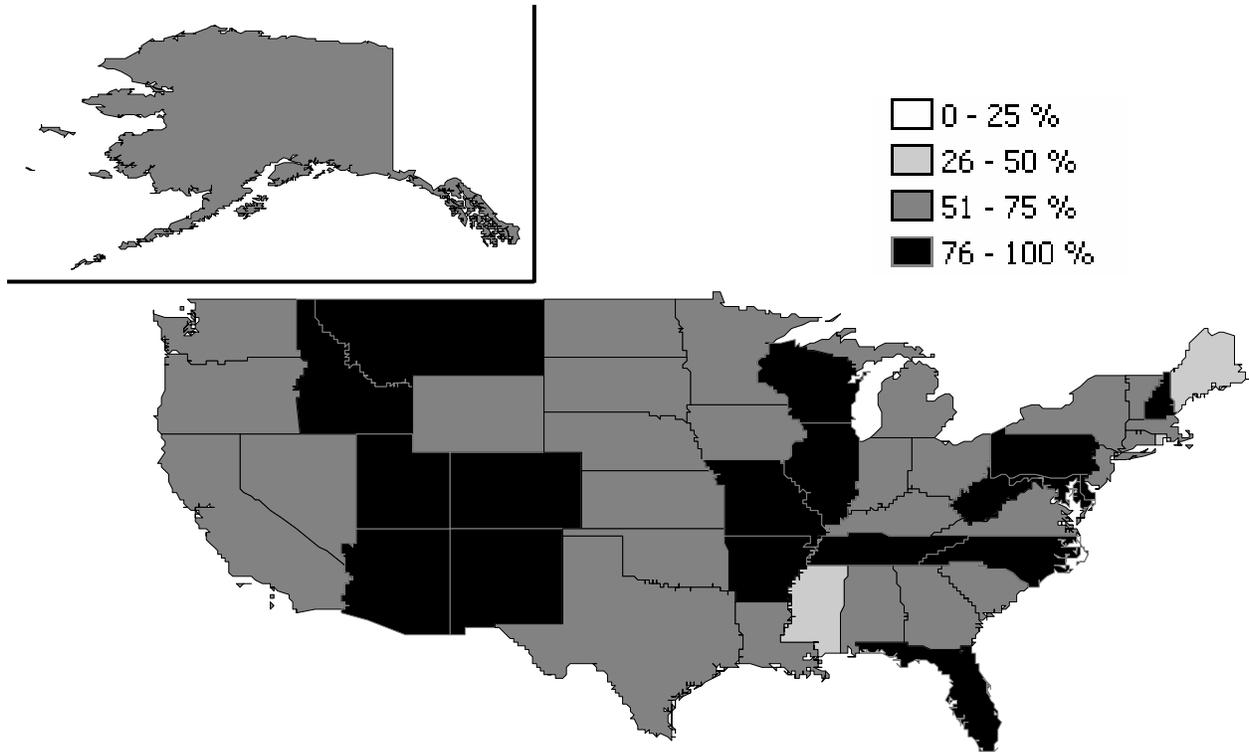
2006 ROUTE COVERAGE

Our thanks to everyone who participated in the 2006 BBS season! Data for 2933 routes have been received by the national office so far. While the numbers are not exact (a small percentage of 2006 data has yet to arrive), Table 1 below provides a good indication of how route coverage in each state shaped up. Just two states experienced notable increases in route coverage this year, Louisiana and Georgia. Louisiana observers picked up 13 more routes than they had in 2005 – a jump from 50 to 70% coverage! That is in no small part a testament to the hard work of coordinator Gary Lester who, in the wake of 2005's storms, rallied the troops to set a base line from which to measure future avian response to habitat recovery. Georgia deserves special mention too as this is the second year that coverage in that state has increased by more than 8 routes - bringing coverage up to 60%. That may not sound like a lot relative to some of the black states depicted in figure 1 below but, when you consider that Georgia added more than 35 newly created routes in 2006, coordinator Todd Schneider's efforts have been appreciably great there.

Nine states experienced a coverage loss of more than five routes in 2005. Check and see if your state was one of them by comparing the "sampled in" columns from years 2005 and 2006 in Table 1. Four states dropped from their previous benchmarks in the 76-100% coverage bracket to the next lower 51-75% bracket. Maine and Mississippi are still in special need of more observer assistance for their sampling effort. Fewer than 50% of routes in these states were covered in 2005 (see figure 1 below) leaving plenty of room for qualified observers wishing to make a difference. If you nest in any of these states, or one of the states experiencing reduced coverage, please encourage your qualified birder friends to migrate over to your state coordinator to lend a wing with the BBS. As always, coordinator contact information is conveniently located on our web site.

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!

Figure 1. 2006 U.S. BBS Route Coverage. Percentage of available routes sampled in 2006 by state. Lighter coloration indicates a greater number of vacant routes and the need for more participants.



BBS STRATEGIC PLAN

In November 2005, a group of experts and stakeholders involved in the North American Breeding Bird Survey met to assist in the development of a 5-year strategic plan for the program. This was a monumental step for the BBS as, despite the demonstrated value of the program for furthering avian conservation across North America, its importance is often underappreciated, and it is underfunded compared with many other government-supported programs that report on status of the environment. Today, BBS resources, adjusted for inflation, are below the amount allocated in the 1970s and are still only sufficient to support two biologists. Yet the number of routes, participants, data, and data requests has quadrupled. Data and information management and delivery requirements and security concerns, non-existent in 1966, impose further demands on BBS resources. The BBS developed this strategic plan to help set priorities and identify resources required for the program to continue to meet the evolving needs of the conservation community. By setting clear goals, strategies, and measures of success, this plan provides a cohesive framework and vision for maintenance and development of the BBS. We are pleased to announce the publication of the “Strategic Plan for the North American Breeding Bird Survey: 2006-2010”, conveniently available for viewing at <http://pubs.usgs.gov/circ/2007/1307/>.

PARTICIPANT AWARDS

With the completion of the 2006 BBS season, 137 participants have earned the following BBS awards:

Recipients appear in alphabetical order grouped by award category

10-years (Commemorative lapel pin) — 61 recipients:

Dalton Adams, William Alexander, David Allen, Thomas Aversa, Jayson Benoit, Robert Birrer, James Biser, Bradley Bolduan, Steve Bouffard, Marshall Brooks, Kris Buchler, Elizabeth Bullard, Jack Connor, Donald Dann, Jeff Davis, Mary Beth Dillon, Russell Emmons, Mark Flippo, James Frank, Deborah Goslin, Michael Greenwald, Mike Griffith, Craig Grother, Kevin Hachmeister, Malcolm Hodges, William Hoppes, Roy Ickes, Mark Johns, Martha Kamp, Ron Ketchum, Ramsay Koury, Alexander Kropp, P. Lynne Landon, Steve Loose, James Malone, Peter Martin, Tracy Mccarthey, Carol McIntyre, Gerry Morgan, Peter Newbern, Keith Pardieck, Debra Patla, Susan Patla, Diane Potter, Richard Preston, Larry Raymond, Adam Rich, Tom Rickman, Cecilia Riley, David Shea, Clyde Sorenson, Paul Sullivan, Priscilla Summers, Daniel Svingen, David Swanson, Larry Teske, Mike Tonkovich, Fred Von Mechow, Dennis Vroman, Dave Williams, Matt Wlasniewski.

20-years (Commemorative key chain) — 27 recipients:

Ty Baumann, Robert Bond, Richard Boyd, Roger Clark, David Cleary, Connie Douglas, Terry Doyle, Lucinda Haggas, Randy Hill, Paul Kittle, Julia Krebs, David Kyler, Thomas Labeledz, Greg Lasley, Meta Little, Stephen Mirick, Paul Raney Jr., Bobby Reed, Terence Schiefer, Ross Silcock, David St. James, John Stuart, Barbara Thrasher, Judith Ward, Donald Ware, Sartor Williams, Thomas Winters.

30-years (BBS cap) — 11 recipients:

Ronald Annelin, Richard Davis, Deanna Dawson, Claude Edwards, Ron Gerstenberg, Timothy Gollob, Thomas Kemp, Michael Kuhrt, Lynn Mckeown, Robert Spahn, Carl Tomoff.

40-years (award to be announced) — 5 recipients:

Robert Pantle, Richard Peake, William Reid, Evelyn Rifenburg, Kenneth Seyffert.

50 Routes sampled (autographed *Birds of North America* guide) — 8 recipients:

David Freeland, Mary Gustafson, Robbye Johnson, Hugh Kingery, Robert Murphy, Tommie Rogers, Eric Soehren, Donald Ware.

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

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Surely most folks who run BBS routes are well aware of the need to keep a vigilant eye towards deer and other large wildlife that may suddenly jut across a driving path. Susan Wise-Eagle from Alaska found a new species to add to the cautionary list – Sandhill Crane! As Susan was hustling from one stop to the next she came upon two figures resting squarely in the road. When she approached, both turned and scrambled up the road ahead of her truck, “flapping” and “squawking” before running off into a muskeg right before her next stop.

Time in the field is always the best way to catch the daily dramas of nature so it’s no surprise that BBS observers often have many great stories to share. On her Wisconsin route, Amber Roth came upon a shy Broad-winged hawk attempting to feed in the middle of the road on a freshly struck mink. Fortunately for the hawk, Amber’s concern for wildlife outweighs the deterrents of road kill and she moved the mink off the road to save the hawk from risk of a similar demise. Gary Phillips experienced a more immediate sense of drama on his South Carolina route as he watched a Red Fox stalk a flock of 3 hen turkeys and 11 polts. He noted that, “one of the hens kept herself between the group and the fox, vocalizing with low “clucks” nearly constantly”. The fox’s “cartoon like - licking of its lips” was the cherry on the story.

Moving up the food chain, Ken Fothergill was fortunate enough to spot a den of Coyote pups along his Idaho route. While it’s sometimes frustrating that the time demands of a BBS run don’t allow for extra observing time, the survey is a great way to locate fantastic photographic opportunities for a return trip later in the day. That task would have been a challenging one for Gretchen Mehmel on the Red Lake, Minnesota route though. Although Gretchen heard Timber Wolves howling during the run, fresh tracks and scat were all that was in evidence for pictures.

Hunter of the land, hunter of the sea – either’s equally impressive in the context of an early morning bird count. That’s a fact Cathy Tighe can attest to. Cathy described the stunning scene of a pod of hunting Orca (Killer Whales) set against a beautiful orange sunrise and a bay full of boats from her Ketchikan, Alaska route. In addition to large mammals, it takes a special observer to take note of the smaller mammals along their BBS routes too. Shelley Steva is just such an observer noting several from her Minnesota route, not the least of which was a tiny vole. That individual was certainly more fortunate than the one that Clem Klaphake spotted on his Nebraska route – in evidence only by its foot hanging out of the mouth of the Garter Snake that was helping it across the road!

Every year brings its share of route safety stories but an especially different and interesting one appeared this year. Craig Kesselheim noted from his pre-run scouting trip that, “there were bees flying everywhere, pollinating the blueberry crop”. Craig suggested that we advise future observers on his Deblois, Maine route to avoid running the route early given all the bees (we concur as BBS bee-proof suites could get expensive). On Tom Hall’s Colorado route, Tom was flagged down by a young man who probably felt like he too had run into a swarm of bees. Tom described the man as “still drunk” and basically looking like ten miles of bad road after some kind of a late night bar brawl. We think Tom made a great choice by calling the Sherriff’s office, leaving it to them, and then continuing his route.

We regularly hear of stories where police check up on observers to ensure that their health and welfare is ok. However, the officers that Ronda Woodward ran across on her Colorado route were apparently more interested in making sure that her species list was up to par. Their

comment, “there are only blackbirds out here – if you want to see birds, we’ll take you to the river where you can see Bald Eagles!” says it all. Lastly, James Sipiora had prematurely thought that by some stroke of luck he had actually managed to complete his TX route without getting stopped. Disappointedly though, on stop 50 he was met by an inquisitive ten year old racing towards him in a golf cart. After James explained that he was performing a bird survey, the child branded him as “freaky”. Much to the surprise and awe of the child, James returned the compliment. Perplexed, the child then paused and stared back before bidding a proper “good-bye” and beating a hasty retreat...leaving James with just the birds and the consolation that, there’s always next year.

Thanks to all those who submitted notes from the field this year. As always, we wish we could publish them all and we look forward to your stories in 2007!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Besides the thousands of you in the field, we would also like to thank Erika Hanner, Alan Hedin, Allison Sussman, and Crystalina McGrail for their outstanding help in the BBS office during the 2006 season.

Good luck & good birding in 2007!

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