A Christmas Tradition for the Birds

nnual holiday traditions such as lighting the Christmas tree and exchanging gifts are familiar to most Americans, but there is one national tradition that is especially important to bird lovers. At the turn of the 20th century, ornithologist Frank M. Chapman of the American Museum of Natural History proposed an annual census of early-winter bird populations. This volunteer-led census, organized by the Audubon Society, became known as the "Christmas Bird Count." The first count was held in 1900 in twenty-five locations.

According to annual reports published by the Audubon Society, Georgia joined the census in 1913, with Atlanta counting 50 species and 1,225 individual birds. By 1949, Glynn County was submitting data from Brunswick, St. Simons Island, and Sea Island on an intermittent basis. In 1951, for example, a team of five women, including local historian Margaret Davis Cate, identified 51 species and 1,359 individual birds in the southern part of St. Simons and Sea Island. Cate was an avid bird-lover who gathered over 100 images of birds for slideshows she presented at The Cloister on Sea Island in the 1940s and 1950s.

The location in our area that appears most frequently in the census is Sapelo Island, where the count was originally organized by the University of Georgia Marine Institute. On New Year's Day 1959, a team of three people took the first Sapelo census, recording 100 species and 2,492 individual birds. On the team was UGA professor Eugene Odum, now known as the father of modern ecosystems ecology.

The archives of the Coastal Georgia Historical Society contains the Sapelo report for the 1963Dr. Hyypio Just sent this. 1 Christmas Bird Count 1963

> Sapelo Island, Ga. (all points within a 15-mile diameter circle, center Sapelo Island, 10 miles long and 3 miles wide, separated from the mainland by extensive estuaries and salt marshes; fresh water marshes and ponds 15%, ocean beach 10%, mud flats 15%, habitation grounds 15%, salt marshes and estuaries 15%, oak forest 15%, pine forest 10%, open fields and pastures 5%). Dec. 29; 6 a. to 6 p.m. Partly cloudy to overcast; temp. 37 to 58 ENE, 1 m.p Thirteen observers in 6 parties. Total party hours, 31 (12 on foot, 13 by car, 6 by boat); total party miles, 98 (8 on foot, 60 by car, 30 by boat). Common loon, 14; Ped-throated Loon, 1; Horned Grebe, 21; Pin-billed Grebe, 7; Brown Pelican, 4; Double-crested Cormorant, 85; Great Blue Heron, 28; Little Blue Heron, 10; Common Egret, 166; Snowy Egret, 63; Louisiana Heron, 15; Black-crowned Night Heron, 15; Mallard, 6; Black Duck, 77; Gadwall, 32; Pintail, 30; Greanwinged Teal Egret, 63; Louisiana Heron, 15; Black-crowned Night Neron, 15; Black Duck, 77; Gadwall, 32; Pintail, 30; Green-winged Teal, 14; Blue-winged Teal, 2; Am. Widgeon, 26; Shoveller, 9; Wood Duck, 3; Ring-necked Duck, 4; Canvasback, 51; Lesser Scaup, 667; Common Goldeneye, 1; Bufflehead, 30; Oldaquaw, 1; Common Scoter, 6; Ruddy Duck, 77; Hooded Merganser, 81; Common Merganser, 1; Red-breasted Merganser, 41; Turkey Vulture, 60; Black Vulture, 44; Sharp-shinned Hawk, 1; Redtailed Hawk, 16; Red-shouldered Hawk, 1; Bald Eagle, 1; Marsh Hawk, 9; Sparrow Hawk, 15; Chachalaca (intro. in 1923), 4; Bobwhite, 10; King Rail, 3; Clapper Rail, 18; Sora, 3; Common Gallinule, 9; Am. Coot, 34; Am. Coystercatcher, 16; Semipalmated Plover, 3; Fiping Plover, 2; Kildeer, 34; Golden Plover, 1; Black-bellied Plover, 48; Ruddy Turn-Am. Cystercatcher, 16; Semipalmated Plover, 3; Piping Plover, 2; Killdeer, 34; Golden Flover, 1; Black-bellied Plover, 48; Ruddy Turnstone, 20; Am. Woodcock, 4; Common Snipe, 18; Spotted Sandpiper, 15; Willet, 12; Greater Yellowlegs, 12; Lesser Yellowlegs, 1; Knot, 30; Lest Sandpiper, 2; Dunlin, 267; Long-billed Dowitcher, 30; Semipalmated Sandpiper, 25; Sanderling, 16; Herring Gull, 42; Ring-billed hull, 391; Laughing Gull, 15; Bonaparte's Gull, 6; Forster's Tern, 57; Royal Tern, 30; Caspian Tern, 9; Black Skimmer, 51; Mourning Dove, 112 Ground Dove, 6; Screech Cwl, 1; Great-horned Cwl, 1; Belted Kingfisher 20; Yellow-shafted Flicker, 101; Pileated Woodpecker, 12; Red-bellied woodpecker, 29; Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, 13; Downy Woodpecker, 5; Eastern Phoebe, 4; Tree Swallow, 275; Common Crow, 60; Fish Crow, 18; Carolina Chickadee, 23; White-breasted Nuthatch, 1; Brown-headed Nuthatch, 3; Brown Greener, 1; House Wren, 3; Carolina Wren, 20; Long-1; Belted Kingfisher, Carolina Chickadee, 23; White-breasted Nuthatch, 1; Brown-headed Nuthatch, 3; Brown Greener, 1; House Wren, 3; Carolina Wren, 20; Northatch, 3; Brown Greener, 1; House Wren, 3; Carolina Wren, 20; Long-billed Marsh Wren, 17; Short-billed Marsh Wren, 1; Mockingbird, 40; Catbird, 2; Brown Thrasher, 12; Robin, 52; Hermit Thrush, 10; Eastern Bluebird, 26; Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, 1; Ruby-crowned Kinglet, 51; Water Pipit, 8; Cedar Waxwing, 20; Loggerhead Shrike, 20; Starling, 78; White-eyed Vireo, 4; Black-and-white Warbler, 5; Grange-crowned Warbler, 7; Myrtle Warbler, 21; Yellow-throated Warbler, 6; Pine Warbler, 25; Fallow-throated Warbler, 6; Pine Warbler, 25; Fallow-throated Warbler, 6; Rine Warbler, 29; Vallow-throated Warbler, 6; Rine Warbler, 6; Ri White-eyed vired, 4; Slater and Warbler, 6; Pine Warbler, 25; 7; Myrtle Warbler, 217; Yellow-throated Warbler, 6; Pine Warbler, 25; Palm Warbler, 29; Yellowthroat, 27; Eastern Meadowlark, 224; Redwinged Blackbird, 222; Boat-tailed Grackle, 542; Common Grackle, 220; Cardinal, 125; Durnle Finch, 1; Am. Goldfinch, 47; Rufous-sided Towhee, 57, Savannah Sparrow, 170; Seaside Sparrow, 30; Vesper Sparrow, 8; Slate-colored Junco, 7; Chipping Sparrow, 26; Field Sparrow, 26; Slate-colored Junco, 7; Chipping Sparrow, 4; Swamp Sparrow, 35; White-throated Sparrow, 174; Fox Sparrow, 4; Swamp Sparrow, 35 Song Sparrow, 43: Total, 134 species; about 6,300 individuals in area count period, but not on count day: Gannet, Pigeon Haw Inswich Sparrow. Participants: Samuel W. Austin, Virginia Baker, W. Wilson Baker, Herman W. Coolidge, C. William Dopson, Jr., Anne Hamilton, R. F. Hamilton, Milton Hopkins, Jr., Milton Hopkins, III, Peter A. Hyypio (compiler), Herbert W. Kale, II, Louis. W. Schweize Ivan R. Tomkins.

64 census, a portion of which is shown here. On December 29, 1963, a team of 13 people recorded 134 species and 6,300 individual birds. The census continues to be taken each year on Sapelo. For the 2018-19 census, thirteen counters identified 113 species.

The Christmas Bird Count continues to be held each year between December 14 and January 5 and, in addition to the United

States, includes locations in Canada, the Caribbean, and Central and South America. Data collected over the past 120 years have provided vital information about the changing status of bird populations and enabled scientists to develop strategies for protecting birds and their habitats. So, for bird lovers interested in adding a new tradition to their holiday season, the Christmas Bird Count is a worthy volunteer effort!



Coastal Georgia Historical Society presents this article and images from our archives as part of our mission to tell Coastal Georgia's inspiring stories. The Society operates the iconic St. Simons Lighthouse Museum and the World War II Home Front Museum, housed in the Historic Coast Guard Station at East Beach. To learn more about the Society, its museums, diverse programs, and membership, please visit coastalgeorgiahistory.org.