

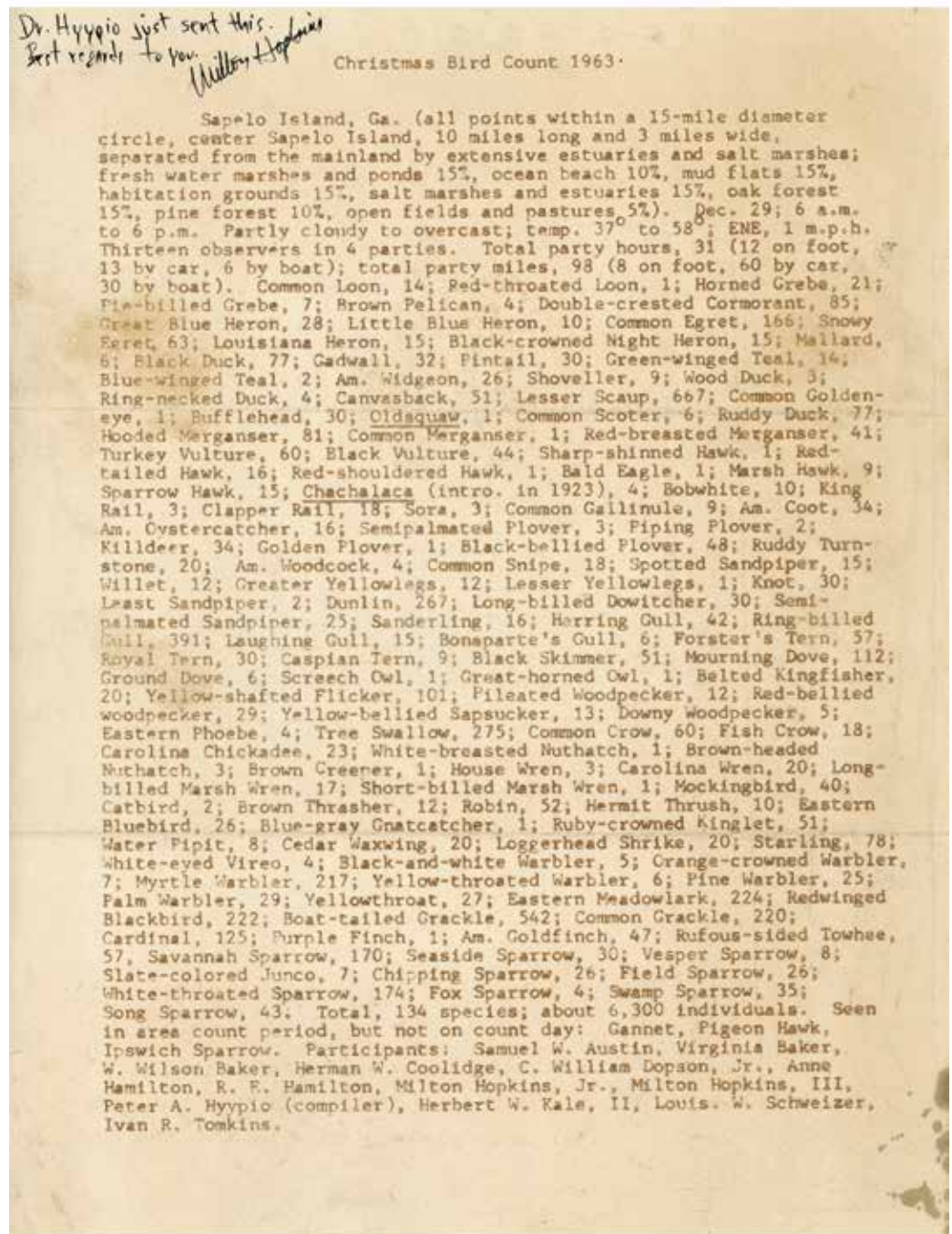
A Christmas Tradition for the Birds

Annual 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 1963-



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!