15 May 2012

Dear Earlham College Birding Big Day Enthusiasts:

Earlham’s 30th annual Birding Big Day was the cooperative effort of dozens of observers and scores of pledgers. The Big Day was conducted on a global basis this year with 49 lists being submitted involving over 70 observers. Forty-four of the lists were from the US with one each from British Columbia (included in the North American totals), Germany, Costa Rica, and New Zealand. In the US, lists had coverage in 22 states: Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York, Virginia, Maryland, Georgia, Florida, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Colorado, Texas, Montana, Arizona, Alaska, Washington, Oregon, and California.

One thing became apparent this year – we’re finding the “global format” lends itself to significant volatility in the final tallies from year to year. Despite more lists being submitted this year than last, we ended up with fewer species on all levels: North America 379 species (387 last year) and the non-North America counts 120 species (218 last year). So we ended up with 499 species in 2012 compared to 605 last year. It wasn’t until today that the final total was compiled – wish we had gotten that one more species to round it up!

Please see the fantastic map of locations along with individual comments and lists that Jonathan ’80 and Dotty Holcomb ’79 Doherty have prepared: http://www.earlham.edu/alumni/connect/bbd

Many factors played into our lower count this year – many folks had conflicts and could only be in the field part time. And with the Griffith-Ward Clan in Germany rather than back home in South Africa, their list was understandably smaller. Deb (Hill) Gimpelson ’67 made up for part of that by sending in a healthy list from New Zealand. We also had fewer observers in Arizona and some of the other “peripheral sites” that hold specialty birds in the US.

Another factor seems to be the nature of the spring of 2012 in North America. As you recall from experience, spring was far ahead of schedule in the East and many of the early migrants were to the north of us by the time early May arrived. Also, the trees here in Indiana were a couple of weeks ahead of their normal schedules. Leaves were out and the spring blossoms were well past. That said, the late migrants seemed absent as if they hadn’t arrived. Now more than a week later many of the late migrants are still unreported here (e.g., Yellow-bellied and Alder Flycatchers, Bay-breasted, Mourning, Connecticut and Canada Warblers). Either their numbers are way down, or quite possibly with the vegetation so far along here and to the north of us, these species have passed through quickly without stopping or lingering in this area.

As I’ve worked through compiling this year’s lists [BTW, Wendy isn’t here to help, she is co-leading an Ecuador cloud forest/Galapagos Islands May Term with Brent Smith!!] I was caught up in the memories and images of places I know well and in my imagination of other places I’ve yet to visit and birds I’ve yet to see – for example, I ‘gotta’ get to Alaska sometime! I found a lot of joy in reading people's lists and accounts.

(over)
One joy was receiving multiple, solid lists from students in Wendy’s spring ornithology class – many reported from back campus, others from their homes after they arrived from school. They have obviously “caught the bug!” Good job, Wendy!

One of the more exotic locales among this year’s counts is the South Bronx, New York, where Stephanie Lane ’04 took her class for a field trip. They have been studying Rock Pigeon varieties around her school, and they expanded their observations for the ECBBD. Her comments are a must-read (see the map). Her work with young immigrants is inspiring.

While not every list contained unique species, 22 North American lists did (of course the international lists had large numbers). Congratulations to those with six or more uniques: Skip Russell ’80 and Darlene Betat, Oregon (14); Todd Engstrom ’76 and Wilson Baker ’62, Florida/Georgia (13); Tim Brush ’77, Texas (10); Martha Hansen ’59, Texas (9); Paul Ode ’86 and Meena Balgopal, Colorado (7); Bill Telfair ’69, California (7); Linda Nunan ’78 and friend (7); and Matt Klostermann ’04, Missouri (6). One will notice pretty quickly that all but one of these is west of the Mississippi River, and that one is from the deep South. Since several groups were out in the Mid-west to New England and eastern seaboard, we overlapped in our lists a great deal! Perhaps the lesson is to plan early May vacations next year to exotic locales (southern Florida, more in Arizona, the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, overseas, etc.)

Some observers took advantage of going out on both days, others had big lists with only a single day in the field. Honors for the largest composite lists for Birding Big Day go to: Skip Russell ’80 and Darlene Betat, Oregon (150 species); Bill Buskirk ’66 and Wendy Tori, Indiana (127); Evan Dalton ’08, Massachusetts (125); Matt Klostermann ’04, Missouri (112); Jonathan ’80 and Dotty ’79 Doherty, Toni ’79 and Bruce ’79 Evans and Rebecca Evans Marvil ’80, Maryland (109); James Sterrett ’99 and Jon Wagner ’04, Oregon (100); Dan Gertiser, Michigan (97); Dan Albrecht-Mallinger ’09 et al., Virginia (91); Frank Sterrett ’71 et al., IL (88); and Paul Ode ’86 and Meena Balgopal, Colorado (80).

For more information see the map with its individual lists and comments.  
http://www.earlham.edu/alumni/connect/bbd

Thanks so much for your participation in this important event for Earlham. Your support is important. Unfortunately for the Earlham Fund, we may have been considerably easier on your pocket books this year! Get prepared for next year!!! Anyone wish to go to Ecuador in early May 2013?!

Warm regards to all, and happy birding,

Bill Buskirk ’66
Professor of Biology, emeritus
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and for Wendy Tori - in absentia!

PS: Remember to go on line to http://www.earlham.edu/alumni/connect/bbd to get the bird lists. If you don’t have access and you would like a hard copy, please let Alison Warren (765) 983-1763 or warreal@earlham.edu know and she will send you a hard copy of the combined lists. Also, there is a link there to our online giving so you may give a new gift or fulfill your pledge.