

# Counting Birds

By ELIZABETH CRUICKSHANK, Regina

Census-taking may be an arduous job when you are counting humans; but a bird census—that is fun.

In winter, birds do not become active until well after sunrise, but we started early on the bird census day hoping to find an owl just retiring. The glorious sunrise not only filled the sky with a rosy glow; it filled our hearts with hope for a successful day.

We had been checking the species within our area to spot their haunts before The Day. Chickadees, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers, a Blackbird, all had fed lately in our yard. So we checked our home grounds first, but found only a few sparrows dozing in the trees.

With Dr. Ledingham as driver and Len Greenberg and I as passengers our car set out. In such likely spots as the shrubbery-surrounded incinerator, the parklike R.C.M.P. grounds and even in the fields about the airport—we saw nothing! A Flicker had been observed by the Shoyamas near their home on Regina Avenue, so we all scanned that tree-lined road. No Flicker! The grounds at the legislative buildings where we had seen a Northern Shrike, Purple Finch and Red-breasted Nuthatches on Christmas Day were birdless for us on Boxing Day—or so it seemed. The feeding station in the trees apparently had not been patronized yet.

Then Fred Bard joined us. He knew all kinds of likely places to hunt: around the grain elevators (for starlings), the Burns plant, the Power House, the cemetery (where we had flushed Sharptails one day), the bypass, the grounds of St. Chads, the east side of Wascana marsh—nothing but pigeons or sparrows everywhere we went. Then we got to the south side of the sanctuary, scanning the thinly-blanketed ploughed fields for

buntings or owls; still no birds willing to be counted. Fortunately the marsh was free from the fog which usually hangs over it where the warm water from the Power House enters the lake. Fred put out grain to feed the birds then gave his perfect goose call, and the birds sailed in. First came the three dozen Canada Geese and the Mute and Whistling Swans who seemed to float in without any effort. Then ducks arrived, more than three hundred making up the raft. The sun glinting on the blue water, the clear crisp air, colorful movement—the experience was breathtaking.

At first glance the ducks seemed to be all Mallards, green heads of the males like shining emerald adornment above copper breasts. Then we recognized a Pintail, and its mate, two Canvas-backs, a dozen Scaup, several Coots, Western and Pied-billed Grebes. Our favorite ducks, the smart wee Ruddies appeared next, followed by a pair of larger divers, the Red-breasted Mergansers. At our feet a muskrat in the warm water played tag with a sunbeam.

The entrancing beauty of the whole scene could have kept us in this spot all day. But December days are short. We had coffee and sandwiches in the car and were off again, excitement keeping us warm. Our hopes were rising now, too, as the list began to shape up.

But we might as well have called it a day then—almost. The wind dropped, it was a perfect day for birding. So, away we went to tree farms, to the city dump, back and forth over quiet roads and busy highways, then to the legislative grounds where in the now fading light we spied the pair of Purple Finches on an ash tree. Another last look at the sanctuary where last year a Snowy Owl sat on the edge of the ice watching all the potential dinners cavorting so near him. No owl! We turned toward home—to get stuck in a snow bank. What a day!

Thrilling - beautiful - strenuous but counting birds can be frustrating, too.