

## BOOKISH BIRD-CENSUS: A FIRESIDE GAME

By AUSTIN L. RAND  
CURATOR OF BIRDS

"CAN WE GET any index as to just how bird-conscious people are?" I thought as my wife and I sat talking in front of our magazine-laden coffee table one evening just after Christmas. Thus was born the idea of a bookish Christmas bird-census. To many a bird lover, the Christmas bird-census is one of the important events of Christmas time. The origin of the custom goes back to 1900 and Frank M. Chapman, who did as much as any one person to make people bird-conscious. He proposed that



the traditional sport of a Christmas shoot be replaced by a new game of making a list of all the birds one could see on a single day near Christmas—a Christmas bird-census. The idea caught on. Now thousands of people, from Alaska to Florida, take part in making these lists that are published in nature magazines, especially *Audubon Magazine*, and often in local newspapers.

### RIGID RULES SET UP

The census has become more than a game, too, for with rigid and complicated rules it has collected a bulk of information over the years on which scientific papers have been based. But casually or seriously done, this modern census is easier on the birds than was the old-time Christmas shoot, and it has helped make people more bird-conscious.

We ran our bookish census by going through the issues of the current periodicals on our coffee table and borrowing a couple from our neighbors, who incidentally had their living room papered in green enlivened by male cardinals in brilliant red full plumage. We made our own rules. No nature or bird magazines to be used; only illustrations of birds, identifiable to family at least, to be used; and a score of one to be given to one kind of bird used in one connection—for example, three crows on a branch would count as one, and two different pictures of doves in the same article would count as one; only domestic magazines to be used.

In two hours we ran through 15 periodicals as follows:

1 weekly paper.....	0 birds
2 daily papers.....	2 "
2 slick magazines.....	2 "
2 topical slicks.....	10 "
1 news magazine.....	1 "
2 popular science	
and travel.....	8 "
1 state advertising.....	2 "
1 literary.....	2 "
4 comic books.....	0 "
16 periodicals.....	27 birds
	of 23 kinds

The systematic list is as follows:

Kind	Number of Birds
Ostrich	2
Penguin	2
Albatross	1
Fulmar	1
Cape pigeon	1
Frigate bird	1
Pelican	1
Flamingo	1
Goose	1
Condor	1
Eagle	2
Ruffed grouse	1
Mearns quail	1
Valley quail	1
California quail	1
Macaw	2
White-winged dove	1
Road-runner	1
Owl	1
Toucan	1
Cardinal	1
Jackdaw	1
Crow	1
23 kinds	27 birds

*Not-acceptable records.* An article on modern design in silk-screen printing showed some 35 items that were "birds," whose characters might have been borrowed from hens, lyre birds, owls, eagles, and night-hawks, several being incorporated into the same individual. Geese, turkeys, and domestic fowl advertised as food were not included.

*Unfigured species.* At first we thought to skim the text for mention of birds but soon found that it was impractical. Our eyes wouldn't stand it. But we did hit on a few; for example, a couple of travel articles contained comments on birds that would have greatly swelled the list.

However, a daily paper, otherwise birdless, contained three news items that should be mentioned: a carrier pigeon, absent for nine years, had turned up; singing caged canaries had been installed in Tokyo police headquarters to calm irate motorists arrested for traffic violation; and seagulls had been using United Nations headquarters as a perch from which to open clams by dropping them to the street below.

*Foreign items.* By excluding these a particularly rich niche was omitted, notably the 38 species of birds mentioned in the Bible portrayed in a two-page spread of the Christmas number of the *Illustrated London News*.

I was surprised that the list was so small. I can remember so many news stories, articles, and illustrations that I've seen. But evidently they don't appear every day and my memory has telescoped them, for the above list is based on a true random sample, selected without planning, though undoubtedly we missed some birds. Of course, the time of year is bad for birds, with life at its lowest ebb. It is perhaps typified by two "birdish" cartoons that I couldn't include for obvious reasons: one was a hunter in a duck blind with a duck call, but not a duck in sight; another, a political cartoon, showed, among other things, a bird cage with open door and a label "dove of peace," but not a bird anywhere.

Noteworthy also is that few birds were recorded more than once, only the ostrich, penguin, eagle, and macaw, and these but twice.

### SOME 'STOCK CHARACTERS'

Only one of our familiar songbirds, the cardinal, is on our list, and that is in an advertisement for a bird book. In the list there are very few bird names that would not be familiar to the general reader of a half century ago, and some are age-old standbys, stock characters in literature: ostrich (Bible), owl (Athena), penguin (*Penguin Island* of Anatole France), albatross (*Ancient Mariner*), pelican (heraldry), flamingo (*Alice in Wonderland*), dove (of peace), eagle (heraldry), and goose (guarding Rome), for instance.

Comparing native birds with exotics we find that 15 are natives of the United States and 8 are exotic. The latter birds represent tropical America, Europe, Africa, and Antarctica.

Eleven of the 27 birds were used in advertisements in such ways as a toucan inviting you to "come to Caracas"; an owl asking, "Do you know?"; photos of game-bird models; and crow, macaw, eagle, penguin, and a cardinal decorating ads with little relevancy. A macaw, labeled "a sarong-snatching parrot," was part of a night-club entertainer's advertisement.

### NON-COMMERCIAL ILLUSTRATIONS

Of the 16 birds not in advertisements, one was in a reproduction of a Breughel painting, six were in reproductions of old illustrations prepared for *Swiss Family Robinson*, eight were illustrations of travel articles, and one sketch, illustrating the alleged enormous appetite of an ostrich, decorated an article on California culture.

With but a single census you can't make comparisons. Perhaps, over the years, further censuses by more people and with wider coverage will enable us to chart trends and show whether or not people are becoming more bird-conscious and if so, how much.





Rand, Austin Loomer. 1955. "Bookish Bird Census: A Fireside Game." *Bulletin* 26(2), 4-4.

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