

## Christmas Bird Count

My husband and I dated with Roger Tory Peterson riding along in our car. A pencil and the *Peterson Field Guide, Birds of North America* bounced along on the bench seat of Ray's 1949 Mercury Sedan as he drove us on deserted country roads looking for rare birds. A "Life List" of at least 150 bird species was required to complete his undergraduate biology degree. Cuddled together we found it pretty hard to stay focused...on birds.

Eventually Cardinals, Orioles, Gold and Purple Finches, Flickers, Hawks, Downy, Harry, Red Headed, Pileated Woodpeckers, Sandpipers, Grebes, Herons, Egrets and Gnat Catchers became common to us. He got an "A" in Ornithology. Birds continue to command our attention. Life lists grew.

We were married before our college graduation. By the time we were twenty-one our first son was born. We had college degrees and were at work teaching in a small town in southern Minnesota.

With two paychecks our family grew. Our careers moved us on. Graduate degrees were earned. We become established on our jobs, in our church and in the community. Over time we were able to design and build a home where our four children would be immersed within the beauty of God's creations. Each child learned to respect the power and the fragility of natural selection. Our passion for observing and protecting bird populations imprinted in our children's psyche.

Composting, passive solar heating, recycling, insulating, wood burning and conserving were the buzz word that guided our new home's design. We laid the house out to use the rising sun to warm our kitchen in mornings. A deck overlooked the lake and was planned for catching the upslope breezes. Large casement windows would ventilate our living spaces. Little auxiliary heating or cooling would be necessary for this house. Simple but elegant living was our goal. Organic gardening and home preserving would give us beauty, order and a healthful life style.

We expected to lounge about watching birds to our heart's content as soon as we took possession of the finished structure.

Pheasants, Geese, Robins, and a few Finches were the only birds about the first year. Spring brought Gulls, Loons, and Ducks to the lake. Over

time our trees grew. Cardinals, Flycatchers, Orioles called. Only Juncos seemed interested in the food we put out in feeders near our home. They only scavenged for food in the grass below the feeder. We tried nectar, suet, thistle, sunflower seeds and cracked corn hoping at least a single Cardinal would stop by our front yard feeder. Instead our rabbits, squirrels and raccoons got fat and bold. Downey, Harry and an occasional Pileated Woodpecker would hang out in our woods loudly tapping on distant trees and the cedar trim of our home.. Most birds remained aloof and illusive; visible only through our binoculars.

One especially beautiful Christmas morning a miracle changed all that.

A snow storm struck during the night. First rain, then the arctic air arrived. Temperatures dropped below freezing. Sleet fell. Tree branches and tall grasses became shrouded with ice. A half a foot of light snow followed. Drifts reached fence height and closed the entrance to our garage. The storm caused low pressure area passed. Before the sun rose West wind swept and polished a clear ice patch beneath the front yard bird feeder.

Our children woke us up before dawn to see what Santa had brought. While I brewed coffee, Ray built a fire in the living room fireplace. The smoke from the first kindling swirled over the roof forming an ice cloud. Our windows steamed. Ray and I snuggled together on the couch. Our kids excitedly opened their presents. One of our boys got up suddenly. "Look outside!" He pointed.

There, through the steaming frame of our living room window, a diamond sparkled fairy land appeared. In the center the rising sun's spotlight focused upon an ice huge tray beneath the bird feeder tree. A Cardinal pair, a Pheasant, a Mallard Duck, a Slate Colored Junco family, a squirrel and a rabbit were all peacefully eating their Christmas feast.

The table set years before; at last the invitation accepted.

**Merry Christmas !**

