

History of the Benicia CBC

Benicia (CABE)

Center on US Hwy 680, 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ mile North of Pierce Lane (38° 08' N, 122° 06' W)

Emerson Stoner initiated the Benicia CBC in 1930. Stoner was an oologist who lived in Benicia and worked at the Benicia Arsenal. He was one of the first treasurers of Point Reyes Bird Observatory and his egg collection resides in the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology. For many years, Stoner ran the Benicia CBC with his friend Jim Barkely or, in later years, one-two other people, amassing counts of 7,000 - 22,000 birds and 55 -70 species. They did not do the counts every year, especially during World War II and the Korean War. A total of 65 Benicia CBCs were held between 1930 and 2011.

In 1970 the Napa-Solano Audubon Society (NSAS) was formed and it's founding president, Frank Beyer, learned about this CBC. He and eight others helped Stoner on the 1970 count and got permission to take it over in 1971. Stoner continued to participate on the count until 1977. The original center of the circle was at Pierce Station on the Southern Pacific Railroad Line, but was moved to the present location in 1972 to avoid overlap with the Contra Costa CBC circle. The present circle includes: all of Benicia; Eastern Vallejo including Hunter's Hill, the highest point in the count; Cordelia; most of Rockville Park; all of Joice Island and parts of Grizzly Island; Suisun Bay; and parts of Martinez at Point Edith and the former Concord Weapons Station. Soon the number of birds rose to as high as 220,000 and the number of species ran into the 130s. Beyer found the first Clapper (now Ridgeway's) and Black rails for the count and birders flocked to find a Black Rail at Benicia State Recreational Area.

When Frank Beyer left for Bremerton, Washington in 1979, John Lovio took over. He initiated a more systematic approach to habitat coverage within the circle, established regular owling parties, approached gun clubs on Grizzly Island about access on count day, and made other changes in count procedure. In 1984, 150 species were tallied for the first time. In 1986 Lovio took on a co-compiler, Robin Leong. They worked on attracting expert birders from elsewhere in the region and tried to establish two boat parties, one in Suisun Bay and a canoe in the sloughs. Count Day was set as the first Monday of the count period to avoid conflicts with waterfowl hunting, which occurs on the weekends. In 1989 John left for San Diego to work on his Master's degree, so Robin took on Harold Connor to help co-compile the count. The average number of participants increased from about 45 to 70. This increase in coverage resulted in averages of 160 species and 100,000 birds. Coverage of the Martinez portion of the circle began in this period, and more landowners were contacted concerning access to count on private property and to provide grants to help out with CBC expenses. Robin assumed sole responsibility for compiling the count in 1993 and has been doing it ever since. The count found 170 species for the first time in 1994 (actually, 166 on Count Day but 4 more in the count period), then officially hit 179 species in 2011. The Benicia Count has ranked as high as 25 out of 2149 in North America if one uses species as a criteria to determine ranking. Heavy rains have brought down the number of birds in recent years (the average count in the last 10 years was 108,686 individuals). It seems that at least 220 party hours are the key to getting the numbers of individuals and species equivalent to the other counts in the region.

So far, 233 species have been recorded on the Benicia CBCs. One of the notable finds on the 2006

CBC was a blue jay! The Benicia CBC has lead the nation for high counts of the following species in past years: American Bittern, Cinnamon Teal (2 years), Greater Scaup, Common Goldeneye, White-tailed Kite (8 years), Northern Harrier (3 years), Red-tailed Hawk (3), Golden Eagle, Black Rail (12 years), Virginia Rail (12 years), Sora, American Kestrel, Violet-Green Swallow, Marsh Wren (4 years), European Starling and Western Palm Warbler. Other compilers frequently inquire as to how the Benicia count tallies so many rails. The Benicia CBC recorded the highest counts nationwide (for the period 1900-2000) of Black Rails (25 in 1999) and Virginia Rails (462 in 1996). Robin has found that 4 boat parties dispersed throughout the aquatic portions of the count circle broadcasting taped calls of various rail species (excluding Ridgeway's Rail) makes for a better count. Also, it is important to recognize that 1/3 of the circle is the Suisun Marsh! Much credit is due to all the participants who have helped with past counts, with special thanks going to Mike Rippey, who has covered the same area since 1977, and Tim Fitzer, who has brought a cadre of counters from Sacramento since 1986 to cover Grizzly Island. One and all are invited to come help out on the Benicia CBC, have a hot potluck at the end of the day, and share bird stories to last a lifetime.

Revised 11-21-14 includes data to 2013