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THE BREEDING BIRD SURVEY IN THE MARITIMES: A volunteer history

It's likely that few Maritime Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) volunteers are aware that the Maritimes played a significant and historic role in the development of the North American Breeding Bird Survey. The first Canadian survey ever run was in Mabou, Cape Breton, on June 2, 1966, and for the first 2 years of the North American-wide project, the bulk of Canada's routes were found in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. Maritimer and Canadian Wildlife Service Biologist Tony Erskine, who set up the first routes in the Maritimes, went on to become the Canadian BBS coordinator between 1968 and 1976, and David Christie, who took over Tony's duties as Maritimes Regional Coordinator and continued to perform them for 26 years, is one of only 3 people nationwide to have ever conducted more than 100 breeding bird surveys.

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Tony Erskine of the Canadian Wildlife Service in Sackville, New Brunswick, was attending the 1965 meeting of the American Ornithologists' Union in Columbus, Ohio. Chandler Robbins, the only non-game bird



Tony Erskine in 1964,
just before he founded
the Canadian BBS in the
Maritimes.

© Janet Erskine

biologist working for the United States Fish and Wildlife Service at the time, approached Tony to ask if he thought he could find volunteers to survey a roadside route in each degree-block of the Maritimes, for all breeding birds. After just a minute's thought, Tony said "We can do it!", and the Maritimes BBS was born.

Since that time, 155 different observers have run BBS routes in the Maritimes, making annual pilgrimages in June to their 50-stop routes, starting a half-hour before sunrise and listening for 3 minutes at every stop. Of these 155 observers, 58 have run more than 10 BBS surveys, and 9 have run more than 40. A list of the 10 Maritime volunteers who have run the most BBS routes since inception is presented on the next page. Several of these volunteers have run routes outside of the Maritimes, but the majority have made their contributions here. Of particular note are 2 volunteers who started their surveys in the very first year of the program, and who are still running the same routes today: David Christie and Jim Wilson.

Canada 

VOLUNTEER HONOUR ROLL

“BBS routes are surveyed by people who don’t think of themselves as extraordinary.” – Tony Erskine

David Christie

Total years of service: **41**
Total BBS surveys run: **108**

Has run the Penobsquis,
N.B. route since BBS
inception in 1966!

Anthony Erskine

Total years of service: **24**
Total BBS surveys run: **86**

Ran many routes across Canada,
not just in the Maritimes.

Wayne Neily

Total years of service: **44**
Total BBS surveys run: **81**

Ran many routes across
Canada, not just in
the Maritimes.

Sylvia Fullerton

Total years of service: **42**
Total BBS surveys run: **63**

Ran the Roman Valley, N.S.
route from 1969–2010,
without missing a single year!



Gerry Lunn

Total years of service: **26**
Total BBS surveys run: **58**

Has run 4 BBS routes
since 1995 including one
started by his parents in
1967 (Cape North, N.S.).

James Wilson

Total years of service: **46**
Total BBS surveys run: **47**

Has run the Hampton, N.B.
route with his wife, Jean,
since BBS inception in 1966,
without missing a single year!

Christopher Helleiner

Total years of service: **22**
Total BBS surveys run: **46**

Ran the Peggy’s Cove, N.S.
route from 1967–1986, the
Larry’s River, N.S. route from
1971–1989, and the Beaverbank,
N.S. route for several years
in the 1960s and 1970s.

Marcel David

Total years of service: **19**
Total BBS surveys run: **41**

Ran the Paquetville, NB route
from 1989–2007 as well as
the Nepisiquit, N.B. route for
12 years and the Shippigan,
N.B. route for 10 years.

Peter Pearce

Total years of service: **35**
Total BBS surveys run: **44**

Ran the Jemseg, N.B. route
from 1971–2006 with a
break between 1992 and
2004 when he ran the
Maquapit Lake, N.B. route.

G. Marion Belyea

Total years of service: **38**
Total BBS surveys run: **38**

Ran the Washademoak, N.B.
route from 1971–2009.

Gerry and Christian Lunn, a father-son BBS team, after completing the Goffs, N.S., route in 1998.
© Gerry Lunn

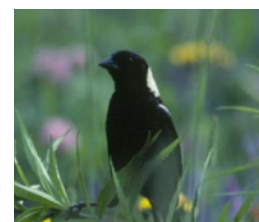


BBS observer Becky Whittam hard at work.
© Camille Koon

A FAMILY AFFAIR

Most BBS volunteers run their surveys with an assistant. Assistants write down species data, work the timer, locate stops based on descriptions and coordinates, and may even provide snacks and general moral support. Many assistants are spouses. Shirley Cohrs, who ran the Shelburne, Nova Scotia route with her husband John from 1977 to 1998, once wrote, “My assistant of 18 years and husband of 43, John, drives, figures out the stops, times me and writes it all down. Not only that, he tries to keep my spirits up when I’m griping about the cold, the heat, the flies, the lack of birds or whatever. He takes me out for dinner the night before and to breakfast afterwards, and usually drives the 60 miles both ways from home!” Jim Wilson and his wife Jean have done the BBS together since the start, and Jim wrote of Jean, in a letter to BBS staff in 2001, “I guess that she’s probably about the longest-running assistant on these surveys. The longevity of hard-working assistants should not be overlooked, as they are just as vital as the observer is to compiling accurate data.”

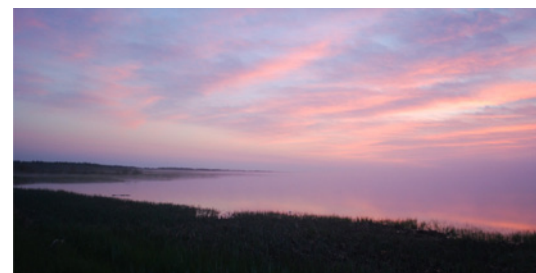
Some surveyors bring their children along for the ride, and some even recruit their children as assistants! Gerry Lunn wrote of his memories from the late 1960s on the Cape North, N.S. route: “I recall being woken up as a little kid while it was still dark in the wee hours of the morning, being tossed into the back of our old Ford Econoline van, and then waking up every now and then with my Mom outside the van identifying birds while my Dad, in the passenger’s seat, recorded them.” While he wasn’t an official assistant on the survey, the experience was clearly a positive one for Gerry because, when he returned to the Maritimes in 1994 as an adult, he was thrilled to be able to take on the Cape North BBS survey and even more thrilled when, in 1998, his seven-year-old son Christian became his assistant. Christian and Gerry have done the survey together almost every year since. Richard Elliot, who has run two routes in PEI since 1992, has also brought his sons Duncan and Malcolm as assistants over the years. Others have brought sisters, brothers and parents.



BBS data played a critical role in assessing the status of a number of landbird species, including the Bobolink.
© Dan Busby

Beautiful sunrises are often cited as the greatest perk of doing a BBS survey.
© Camille Koon

One of thousands of BBS roadside stops in the Maritimes.
© Martin Raillard





A perfect BBS
morning on the
Boisdale, N.S. route.
© Camille Koon

THE NEW CROP

Every year new volunteers join the BBS across Canada. In 2011, there was a bumper crop of volunteers in the Maritimes, with six new recruits! These hardy souls (and their route assignments) were Pat Kelly (Dean Chapter, N.S.), James Churchill (Richfield, N.S.), Laura Saunders (Point Michaud, N.S.), Ally Manthorne (Roman Valley and Larry's River, N.S.), Fiep de Bie (Alberton, P.E.I.) and Martin Raillard (Cloverdale and Wapske, N.B.). Martin Raillard took on two routes in western New Brunswick that hadn't been run in many years. He packed his camping gear into his truck and off he went. He ran into a bear, biting no-see-ums that were small enough to get through his tent screen and bug shirt, a washed-out bridge and a private woods road requiring a key for access! Martin persevered, however, and finished the routes. He wrote, "Much had changed in bird diversity, as old growth forests had given way to clear-cuts and secondary growth. Woodpecker numbers were way down, but new species had moved in and I even spotted an Indigo Bunting, a species not previously seen on these routes. It took me four days to finish the work, due to the extensive scouting required, but I completed both routes and now a new baseline has been established. My respect has grown even higher for the hundreds of volunteers who diligently run their routes every year."

May your surveys be blessed with good weather, little traffic, no flat tires or other vehicle problems, and especially with lots of interesting birds.

– David Christie,
signing off after
26 years as BBS
Maritimes Coordinator,
in May 1995.

THE VALUE OF VOLUNTEERING FOR BIRDS

Indeed, Martin's observations mirror those of many volunteers who have noted countless changes in bird diversity and abundance over the years. These are the data that feed into the national and North America-wide database, and that are used to make decisions such as whether or not a species should be assessed as threatened or endangered. The recent status assessments of species such as the Canada Warbler, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Rusty Blackbird, Barn Swallow, Common Nighthawk and Chimney Swift by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) would not have been possible without BBS data indicating significant declines over the last decade and beyond.

A great debt of gratitude is owed to all volunteers, both surveyors and assistants, regardless of their length of contribution, who have participated in the Maritimes BBS since 1966. The BBS was envisioned as a volunteer-driven project from the start and when, 46 years ago, Chandler Robbins asked Tony Erskine if he could find the needed volunteers in the Maritimes, Tony's response was accurate: We can do it—and we are still doing it. Thank you, everyone, for your incredible contributions.

For more information on the Breeding Bird Survey in the Maritimes, contact Becky Whittam, Environment Canada's Canadian Wildlife Service becky.whittam@ec.gc.ca; 506-364-5189

Visit the North American BBS website: www.pwrc.usgs.gov/BBS/
The BBS is a cooperative effort between Environment Canada's Canadian Wildlife Service and the U.S. Geological Survey's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center to monitor the status and trends of North American bird populations.

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