

An Incredible Christmas Bird Count

The Audubon Christmas bird counts are conducted each year to count all the birds by species within a circle of a diameter 15 miles. One of these counts, the Montauk (Long Island) Christmas Bird Count, had been conducted since 1920. After my late wife Joanne and I moved to New York City, we began to take part in various counts. This included the Montauk Christmas Bird Count. Although Gardiners Island was within the count circle, it had not been included in the count because no one was able to go there. In 1966, negotiations took place with Robert Gardiner for access to the island. Although approval had not been obtained, Joanne and I decided we



would sail our Klepper kayak out to the island that year. The Klepper kayak has, in addition to oars, a mainsail, a jib, two leeboards and a rudder. The night before the count, we drove our car to the closest point on Long Island, a location called “Fireplace”. Arriving after dark, we parked the car at the end of the road, which went straight into the water. We then began sleeping as best we could in order to be ready for the next day. That night a car drove past us and over the sand dune at the end of the road. At first we ignored what had just happened, thinking the driver would back up and leave. However, after some time the car was now in the water and the wheels were turning backwards and forwards. I waded into the water on the driver side and a lady opened the door and said “Where am I? What body of water is this? “. I said “ma’am this is the Atlantic Ocean!“. I helped her out of the car, and through the water which was a foot or more deep. We then took her in our car back along the road looking for a house which had lights on. She said that her name was “Elaine”, and that she was trying to find the ferry to Shelter Island. We soon determined that she was Elaine de Kooning, a well-known artist and the wife of the famous Willem de Kooning. Most of the houses were not occupied during winter. After driving several miles, we finally found a house with lights on and rang the doorbell. The owner welcomed us and offered us drinks! She accepted! We declined and left her there. Driving back to our place at the end of the road, we tried to get some sleep. Shortly thereafter, a tow truck did show up, pulled her car out of the water and took it away. We never saw her again, but I am certain that we saved her life that evening!



The next morning we assembled the kayak which was secured on top of the car and sailed away toward Gardiners Island. It was an incredible trip of at least two miles across the water! Various water birds came very close to the kayak. As we neared Gardiners Island, we lowered the sails and paddled in to an area where we could hide the boat. Joanne and I then went in separate directions in order to maximize the area we covered. Soon she was apprehended by the caretaker on the island, a man by the name of Jock Mackay. She explained to him that we were counting birds for the Montauk Count, to which he replied that we had no permission to be on the island and had to leave immediately. They then began to look for me in his jeep. At a distance, I saw them coming and repeatedly hid myself. Mackay finally gave up and let Joanne continue counting. We found some very interesting species such as Wild Turkey, a bird which had not been previously reported on the count. Several small lakes on the island were filled with interesting waterfowl. Later that day, after having been on the island about seven hours, we met at the kayak, and sailed back across the bay to the car. We then met up with the other count participants and added some very interesting species to the final tally. This was the first visit to Gardiners Island on a Christmas count. I will never forget it!



In succeeding years, a group of birders went to the island with the full cooperation and participation, of Robert Gardiner. I and Robert Paxton became count organizers and compilers. Some noted participants included Roger Tory Peterson and his wife, as well as George Plimpton and Russ Kinne. Gardiner frequently made the large manor house available overnight before the count. I stayed there several times. On several occasions, I also flew my Mooney aircraft to the island, landing on the short grass landing strip.

But, with respect to The Montauk Christmas Count, I will always think back to that first trip and the incident with Elaine de Kooning!