

## Counting Etiquette

By John Taylor

If I had a nickel for every time someone asked me, "How do you count all those birds?", I'd be a rich man. "Is there anything to it, or is it just a wild guess?" Well, I can tell you it's not a wild guess. I made the mistake of asking just such a question 24 years ago to a crusty biologist in Southern Illinois. It was January, and I was fresh from southern New Mexico in the middle of a rough winter (at least I thought so). George was so annoyed (I've toned down his actual true feelings), he told me to get out of the truck and walk. It took 15 minutes of fast talking to assure him I was just a hick kid who didn't know anything (as if it was hard to convince him of this). It was then that I first realized there is some etiquette to asking questions regarding the censusing of wildlife. This, of course, is the correct terminology.

For weeks I would accompany George. I was a thorn in his side, I knew. I worked hard not to get in his way, cramp his style. I kept my mouth shut and my eyes open. I had so much nervous energy it made it all the harder for me. But what a spectacle it was, I had never seen so many birds in my life! Canada geese by the thousands, scores of bald eagles, coyotes, I was mesmerized. George, it turned out, kept the official count of all wildlife, but the big issue was the size of the Canada goose flock. It had grown by leaps and bounds, and states further south were mad as hell because Illinois was shortstopping their geese. He would turn in his count twice a week and then retreat back to the field. I would see the final count, 280,000 or 310,000. The phones would ring constantly in the meantime from Minneapolis. The count couldn't be right. There must be some mistake. George was under intense pressure. I didn't say a word, I just kept shadowing him like I was told to do.

After 6 weeks, things finally broke one day. I just couldn't keep my mouth shut any longer.

After all, I wasn't just along for the ride, I was supposed to learn something. George could feel the tension, maybe he was feeling a little guilty. I had my binoculars and I would write down my numbers but he never asked me what I thought. Finally, out of the blue, he asked, "What did you get." I told him and he just looked at me and didn't say a word. This was my opening, I felt we had a new relationship. He was scanning the flock and I asked him, "How many do you have so far?" I was out of the truck again. My first lesson in counting etiquette, never interrupt a count. I was mad, and he was mad. I said I was sorry I had interrupted him, but I was still mad. Something gave way then. He let me back in the truck, and there was some mutual respect after that. He could no longer order me out of the truck. We warmed up to each other, but my etiquette lessons continued. I was new and out of my element. I was homesick for New Mexico. My banter never ceased. While scanning a huge flock one day I said, "I've got 43,000 so far, what do you have?" He put down his glasses and looked at me for a long while. "What?" I said. He looked at me sternly and replied, "Do you know how bad it can throw off a count by comparing numbers before someone is finished counting? It can ruin your concentration and your confidence." My second lesson was thereafter ingrained in my mind, never pop out a number until the other counter is finished counting, otherwise it can bias the estimate. He was kinder to me this time though.

My lessons began shortly afterward. The next week in a carefully orchestrated move he took me to a usual overlook to scan the flocks. He stopped the truck in the snow and said, "Well, count them." I was as nervous as a goose in a coyote pack. I looked at the flock he wanted me to count for a long while, and he watched me the entire time. I finished and he held up his hand for silence. He looked the flock over and said, "Well, what did you get?" He just shook

his head after my reply. This continued for a solid week with the same response. I knew I was not doing it the way he wanted, and for sure my numbers were way off. I had total confidence in George. How could the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service entrust him with such an important responsibility if he wasn't good at what he did? I tried harder. I went from right to left, top to bottom, I estimated, I guessed. That was it then, I was guessing. He knew it too. The next week we pulled up to the usual spot. He carefully pulled something from his bag. It was a foldup checkerboard. "Today I'm going to teach you what you need to know", he said. "I want you to imagine this checkerboard over that flock of geese. Then I want you to make the squares bigger or smaller until you can fit 100 geese in a square. Once you're done, add up the squares." We were on a high bluff looking straight down on the flock. I made my count and he made his, and he smiled. "You're getting closer", he said. "All you had to do was count them." My lessons continued. The next day he took me to a tougher location where there was no overlook. The birds were stretched out for a least a quarter mile towards the horizon. He handed me the checkerboard and said, "What are you going to do now?" I puzzled for awhile, then he took the

checkerboard and turned it at the same angle that the birds were spread out in from of us. Every square was now a trapezoid with the ones closest the largest, and the ones toward the horizon, the smallest. This lesson was harder and we continued to compare numbers as the winter progressed. He would never let me know his tally, but I would know by the expression on his face whether I was close or not.

I grew quite fond of George, and I think he was fond of me. He would invite me to his house for dinner, and I would help him with his farm chores. His kids had moved on, and I was needing some feeling of family about then. He was the best storyteller I ever knew, and he treated me like his own boy. He looked out for me. I never went back to Illinois, and I never saw George again. I don't know if he's alive or dead, but I will always thank my lucky stars that he was my first mentor. He taught me how to count and as importantly, some counting etiquette. Oh, by the way, they flew over the huge flocks of geese and photographed them, then counted the birds by hand. George was within 5%. I think hand counting birds in photographs must have an error of at least 5%.