

**WINTER AERIAL COUNTS OF BIRDS
ON THE CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVER**

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Since 1981 I have taken part in an annual winter eagle count that has followed the Chattahoochee River from Cottonton, Russell Co., to the Florida state line, Houston Co., a distance of about 135 km. It was done each year early in January, usually during the first week. The main objective of the count was to count the eagles that were present. It also presented the opportunity to count other raptors and wading birds.

Methods

The counts were made from several models of fixed-wing aircraft: Cessna 150, 152, 172, or Piper Warrior. I flew from the Auburn or Tuskegee airports to Cottonton, then followed the Chattahoochee River south to the Florida state line. I flew at an altitude of about 160 m above ground level, and at a speed of about 160 to 180 km/hr., depending on which aircraft I used. The flight to the Florida state line required about 40 min. each way. While flying, I could see both banks of the river and the water and sandbars, except at the widest parts of Lake Eufaula. All species could be seen easily and counted, while flying down and back. The duplication in counting was corrected for by taking the largest number of each species seen in each block.

To facilitate recording for the eagle count, the route was subdivided into seven 10-minute blocks of latitude. Block 1 was from 32 deg. 10 min. to 32 deg. 0 min.; Block 2 was from 32 deg. 0 min. to 31 deg. 50 min.; Block 3 was from 31 deg. 50 min. to 31 deg. 40 min.; Block 4 was from 31 deg. 40 min. to 31 deg. 30 min.; Block 5 was from 31 deg. 30 min to 31 deg. 20 min.; Block 6 was from 31 deg. 20 min. to 30 deg. 10 min.; and Block 7 was from 31 deg. 10 min. to 31 deg. 0 min.

Results

The results of the counts are presented in Table 1, page eight.

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TABLE 1. WINTER AERIAL COUNT OF BIRDS ON THE CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVER

	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
Great Blue Heron	22	15	50	31	3	5	23	33	11
Great Egret	8	11	250	156	28	4	168	119	41
Double-crested Cormorant	0	0	12	75	0	0	14	1	6
Ring-billed Gull	85	606	0	570	569	239	910	1140	1423
Bonaparte's Gull	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Turkey Vulture	16	8	60	20	3	4	36	7	16
Black Vulture	16	1	30	4	0	3	0	0	5
Red-tailed Hawk	1	6	1	6	0	1	1	3	2
Red-shouldered Hawk	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
Bald Eagle	3	0	1	1	0	1	2	2	1
American Crow	16	75	30	30	20	0	0	4	20
American Kestrel	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Northern Harrier	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1

Discussion

Table 1 shows total numbers but not the distribution of the birds in the blocks as they were recorded. Most of the wading birds were recorded in blocks 1-4. Great Egrets (*Casmerodius albus*) were concentrated in the Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge (blocks 2 and 3) and below the Walter George Lake (Lake Eufaula) dam at Ft. Gaines in block 4. The Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) was most abundant on the Eufaula Refuge in blocks 2 and 3. In general, the slow-moving shallow water of Lake George and the marshes of the Eufaula NWR were better habitat for the herons than the steep banks and faster, deeper water of the river below the Ft. Gaines Dam. Gulls were concentrated on Lake George (blocks 1-4), but were scattered all along the river. Raptors were distributed all along the lake and river. The fluctuations in numbers do not show definite trends for most species. However, the Ring-billed Gull population does appear to be on an upswing.

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