**A Flexible and Efficient Modeling Strategy for Trend Analysis of Continent-Scaled Bird Count Data**

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**Abstract**

**Key Words**

Audubon Christmas Bird Count, Bayesian hierarchical model, North American Breeding Bird Survey, Population trends, Spatially varying coefficients, Conditional autoregressive model

**Introduction**

Volunteers with the Audubon Christmas Bird Count (CBC) have been counting wintering birds across North America every year for the last 118 years (Dunn et al. 2005, Soykan et al. 2016). Population trends derived from CBC data, along with those derived from other large-scaled monitoring programs like the North American Breeding Bird Survey (BBS, Sauer and Link 2011), are important pieces of information for understanding the conservation needs of North American bird species (Dickinson et al. 2010, Hochachka et al. 2012, Rosenberg et al. 2016, Sauer et al. 2017).

The current standard approach for generating trends from CBC data (Link et al. 2006, Soykan et al. 2016) is based on methods originally developed for BBS data (Link and Sauer 2002, Sauer and Link 2011). The general approach is to assign counts in Canada and the US to one of 169 spatial strata, which are intersections of US states, Canadian provinces, and Bird Conservation Regions (BCR, Sauer et al. 2003). Then, treating each stratum as independent, use a non-linear function to remove the effect of observer effort on counts, and model the residual as a function of count circle, stratum, and year. Next, model parameters are used to derive a relative abundance index per stratum and year, and those indices are used to compute percent change per stratum across different end points (Link and Sauer 2002, Sauer and Link 2011).

The pros of the current CBC approach are as follows. By pooling count circles per stratum, this approach deals with the issue of count locations haphazardly becoming active or inactive over the time series (Sauer and Link 2011, Soykan et al. 2016). By pooling per stratum, a large enough sample of counts is attained to generate a reasonably robust count-effort correction function (Link and Sauer 1999). The approach produces a relative abundance index per year and stratum, which can be summed across larger strata, such as states, provinces, or BCRs, and used to calculate change in relative abundance at larger spatial scales. Finally, producing annual abundance indices enables evaluation of change across any desired end points.

The cons of the current approach are as follows. As implemented, it is a computationally intensive process, especially for wide-ranging species such as the American Robin, as it uses Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) to estimate model parameters for relative abundance, and then processes large MCMC chains to scale relative abundance to larger aggregate units and generate trend estimates. Calculating change in relative abundance across two time points ignores intervening data, and may not produce an estimate that represents an overall trend (Rosenberg et al. 2017). While trends can be scaled up to larger aerial units, they cannot be scaled down to smaller ones. The analytical strata is the finest level of resolution, which limits the extent to which trends can be attributed to specific factors occurring at finer spatial scales (Thogmartin et al. 2004, Bled et al. 2013). It does not take full account, or full advantage, of spatial relationships in counts. Modeling this structure would facilitate borrowing information across spatial boundaries, allowing more robust trend estimates in places where there is a shortage of data (Thogmartin et al. 2004, Bled et al. 2013). Indeed, borrowing information would allow trends to be estimated at spatial scales that are finer than the spatial strata currently used.

Work by Thogmartin et al. (2004), Bled et al. (2013), and Smith et al. (2015) offered spatially-explicit variations of the standard trend analysis approach. These works were focused on analysis of BBS data, but their approaches are easily related to analysis of CBC data. Their approaches contrasted with the standard approach, described above, in the following ways. Instead of using the standard strata described above, Thogmartin et al. (2004) assigned count sites to irregular polygons, created by tessellation of BBS route locations. Bled et al. (2013) assigned routes to cells on a regular grid, with one-degree latitude and longitude spacing. All three studies utilized spatially-structured (intrinsic conditional autoregressive model, ICAR, Besag et al. 1991) random intercepts for relative abundance per polygon or grid cell. Thogmartin et al. (2004) utilized a fixed effect of time per BBS route, but that effect did not incorporate spatial structure. Bled et al. (2013) and Smith et al. (2015) did not include a fixed effect of time. Instead, they estimated relative abundances per year, and then trends were generated as a derived parameter after model analysis.

Here, we present a different approach for calculating temporal trends in relative abundance, one that takes advantage of the considerable spatial structure in CBC data. This approach borrows components from previous ones, incorporates new components that prioritize robust trend estimation at finer spatial scales, and employs a relatively simple and computationally efficient workflow. Similar to Bled et al. (2013), we assigned CBC count sites to cells on a uniform grid that covered North America. Like Thogmartin et al. (2004), temporal trends were explicit components of the model. In contrast to previous work, effort and year effects were modeled as random slopes with spatial structure, following a spatially varying coefficient (SVC) approach (Gelfand et al. 2003, Finley 2011, Congdon 2014). Finally, unlike prior studies using MCMC, we used integrated nested Laplace approximation to estimate Bayesian posteriors for model parameters (Lindgren and Rue 2015, Rue et al. 2017), which led to a considerable decrease in computing time. The three goals of this report were to describe a different approach to calculating trends in Christmas Bird Count data, demonstrate the approach using data for the American Robin, and compare the results derived from the SVC approach to those derived from the standard approach.

**Methods**

***Statistical model***

We modeled Christmas Bird Counts, for grid cell *i* encompassing count circle *k* during year *t*, as a random variable from a negative binomial distribution. Expected values for counts per grid cell were assumed to be a function of spatially-structured grid-cell, count-effort, and year effects. The linear predictor for took the form

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Here, was a cell-specific relative abundance term that comprised the sum of two components, . The first component, , was a global intercept averaged over all grid cells. The second component, , was a spatially-structured random effect per cell, modeling deviations from the global intercept with ICAR structure, where values came from a normal distribution, with a conditional mean related to the average of adjacent cells, and with conditional variance proportional to the variance across adjacent cells and inversely proportional to the number of adjacent cells (Besag et al. 1991). Spatial structure was incorporated into to allow for information about relative abundance to be shared across neighboring cells.

was a cell-specific slope term for the effect of effort on counts. was also a composite term, comprising the sum of two components, . The first component, , was a global effect of effort derived over all grid cells. The second component, , an SVC term, was a spatially-structured random slope per cell, modeling local variation in the effort effect with ICAR structure, where values came from a normal distribution, with a conditional mean related to the average of adjacent cells, and with conditional variance proportional to the variance across adjacent cells and inversely proportional to the number of adjacent cells (Gelfand et al. 2003). Spatial structure was incorporated into to allow for information about the effort effect to be shared across neighboring cells. Effort was represented by , the number of party hours expended during a count, where a party hour was the count effort of one party of unspecified size for one hour. Pairing log-transformed counts with log-transformed effort in the linear predictor yielded a power function for effort correction, a flexible form that accommodated a decreasing, linear, or increasing impact of effort on expected counts (Butcher and McCulloch 1988, Link and Sauer 1999).

was a cell-specific slope for the effect of year on counts. Similar to and , was a composite term, comprising the sum of two components, . The first component, , was a global effect of year derived over all grid cells. The second component, , an SVC term, was a spatially-structured random slope per cell, modeling local variation in the year effect with ICAR structure, where values came from a normal distribution, with a conditional mean related to the average of adjacent cells, and with conditional variance proportional to the variance across adjacent cells and inversely proportional to the number of adjacent cells (Gelfand et al. 2003). Spatial structure was incorporated into to allow for information about the year effect to be shared across neighboring cells. Year, represented by *T*, was transformed before analysis such that max(*T*) = 0, and each preceding year took an increasingly-negative integer value. Given the scaling of effort and year variables, could be interpreted as cell-specific expected counts given one party hour of effort during the final year in the time series.

The final term in the model, , was a random effect that accounted for variation in relative abundance among circles, possibly due to differences in habitat conditions or observer experience (Soykan et al. 2016). Note that the model did not include a normally-distributed, observation-level random effect to deal with overdispersed Poisson counts, as is done in the standard approach (Sauer and Link 2011, Soykan et al. 2016). Rather, we used a negative binomial count distribution for *y,* with mean and dispersion parameter , which can be written as and (Simpson et al. 2017). This approach is analogous to using a gamma-distributed, observation-level random effect to deal with overdispersed Poisson counts, and yields , which summarizes the degree of overdispersion.

***Data***

We used data for the American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*), from Christmas Bird Counts conducted across North America from 1966 through 2017, to demonstrate the SVC modeling approach and compare results with those using the standard approach. Before modeling the data, extreme outliers (> 3 SD from the mean, after log transformation) in counts and effort were removed. After filtering, there were 78,140 counts from 3,195 count circles for modeling.

Locations of the 3,195 count circles were mapped using the North American Albers Equal Area Conic projection (EPSG 102008, https://epsg.io/102008) and assigned to 880 cells on a grid divided along 100 km increments in latitude and longitude (Fig. 1A). Grid cells formed a continuous lattice within a non-convex polygon created using circle locations. A continuous uniform lattice was used to improve qualities of the neighborhood structure used in ICAR modeling (Bled et al. 2013). The number of count circles per grid cell varied from 0 to 20, but averaged 2.76 (Fig. 1B). The number of neighbors for a given grid cell ranged from 1 to 8 and averaged 7.48.

***Computing***

The hierarchical SVC model described above was analyzed in a Bayesian context using the R-INLA package (Rue et al. 2017) for R statistical computing software (R Core Team 2016). Prior distributions for , , and were specified as normal distributions with mean = 0 and precision = 0.001, where precision = 1 / variance. Prior distributions for , , and exchangeable and ICAR random effects were penalized complexity (PC) priors with parameter values and . Readers are referred to Simpson et al. (2017) for the details of and rationale behind PC priors. Along with parameter estimates, R-INLA has the capacity to return from model analysis conditional predictive ordinate (CPO, Pettit 1990) and cross-validation probability integral transform (PIT, Dawid 1984) values to evaluate individual model fit (Czado et al. 2009) and compare different models to one another (Gneiting and Raftery 2007). In this application we were not comparing multiple models, however, we extracted PIT values and visually inspected their histogram, as an approximate uniform distribution is expected for a model that fits the data reasonable well (Czado et al. 2009, Held et al. 2010).

After model analysis, posterior distributions for composite parameters , , and were constructed by sampling from the joint posterior, and summing draws from appropriate marginal distributions. Posterior medians, along with 95% credible intervals per grid cell were computed and mapped for each composite variable to visualize spatial variation in 2017 abundance indices, effort effects, and 1966 through 2017 relative abundance trends. Before mapping, cells with no observed counts were removed from the dataset as we were not interested in interpolating trends to locations without CBC sites.

It is common, during CBC and BBS analyses, to aggregate trend information to larger scales that might be of interest to resource managers designing and implementing policies across states, provinces, BCRs, or nations. After analysis of the SVC model for American Robin, we aggregated 100 km results to the BCR level, in order to compare them to those produced using standard CBC analysis methods (Soykan et al. 2016). SVC trends were aggregated for each BCR by averaging trends for all equal-area grid cells where the cell center fell within the BCR. We also compared the uncertainty around trend estimates by calculating confidence interval widths per cell, and comparing these widths to those calculated for a BCR using the standard approach.

**Results**

Model analysis took approximately 5 hours to complete for full Bayesian results and approximately 1 hour to complete for Empirical Bayes results. Output from the full Bayesian analysis gave a posterior median of 0.772 for , the global effort effect (Table 1). This value represented a power law exponent for the relationship between effort and counts. A value significantly greater than 0 and less than 1 indicated that, on average, there was a positive relationship between effort and counts, but that there were diminishing returns for additional count effort. The posterior median estimate for , the global year effect, was 0.022 (Table 1). This indicted that, on average, American Robins have increased by approximately 2.2% per year between 1966 and 2017, or 210% over the 52-year period. The estimate for , the dispersion parameter, was 1 / 0.449 = 2.227, considerably larger than 1, highlighting overdispersion in Robin counts relative to a Poisson distribution (Table 1). Precision estimates for the random effects showed that all were important for explaining variation in the data. Precision values were converted to a standard deviation scale, and the random effects were ranked , , , and , in terms of the amount of variation explained (Table 1).

Samples from the joint posterior were acquired and summed to construct posteriors for composite parameters = , , and . A map of posterior median values illustrated that, given a standard count effort of 100 party hours, American Robin relative abundance varied widely across their range, from values less than 5 to greater than 2,000 (Fig. 2A). The species was most abundant in regions with intermediate winter temperatures, and was least abundant in relatively warm and cold regions.

A map of posterior median values highlighted spatial variation in the exponent for the effort effect (Fig. 2B). Across much of the continent, the posterior median was significantly greater than 0 and significantly less than 1, indicating that increasing effort had a diminishing positive effect on counts. In other parts of the continent, the posterior median was not significantly different from 1, implying a positive linear relationship between effort and Robin counts. Locations with posterior medians close to 1 (Fig. 2B) were frequently locations with very high abundance indices (Fig. 2A), suggesting an endless supply of Robbins for CBC volunteers to count in these areas.

A map of posterior median values (Fig. 2C) showed that, while American Robbins have become more abundant overall (Table 1), trends in relative abundance have strong spatial variation. Credible intervals for values were used to determine where trends were significantly negative or positive. Figure 2D highlights a pattern that is common for widely distributed North American bird species, where relative abundance has generally decreased in the warmer parts of their range and increased in the colder parts of their range.

A common practice following standard CBC and BBS analysis is to aggregate trends from analytical strata level up to larger scales, such as the BCR level. We were interested to see how aggregate trends, generated using the SVC method, compared to those from the standard method. Figure 3 shows the posterior median of posterior median SVC trends across cells per BCR (Fig. 3A) along with the posterior median trend for each BCR from the standard analysis (Fig. 3B). Side-by-side visual comparison of these maps showed that aggregate trends were very similar in direction, regardless of method. There were, however minor differences in that trends derived from the SVC changed more gradually across the continent, as would be expected using a spatial statistical model. Also, the range of SVC trends was slightly less than that for standard trends at geographic range boundaries, as would be expected given the sharing of information across space. The Spearman coefficient describing the rank correlation between trends generated by the two methods was highly significant, at 0.88.

We were also interested in learning how the precision of trend estimates compared across the two approaches. Figure 4 compares the credible interval widths for SVC trends per grid cell (Fig. 4A) with those for aggregate BCR estimates from the standard approach (Fig. 4B). When compared to the standard approach, some SVC grid cells within a BCR, ones in information rich neighborhoods (Fig.1A), had SVC trend estimates with relatively narrow confidence intervals (Fig. 4C, SVC minimum). Other grid cells, ones in information poor neighborhoods (Fig.1A), had trend estimates with relatively broad confidence intervals (Fig. 4C, SVC maximum). On average, however, precision of estimates per BCR were similar, regardless of method, if not slightly higher using the SVC approach (Fig. 4C, SVC median).

**Discussion**

The goals of this report were to describe a different approach for calculating trends in Christmas Bird Count data, demonstrate the approach using long-term count data for the American Robin, and compare the trend results derived from the SVC approach to those derived from the standard approach. We showed that the SVC approach is capable of generating trends at a much finer spatial scale than the standard method, with comparable precision. Further, the SVC approach produced aggregate trends that were similar in direction, magnitude, and precision to those generated using the standard method.

To put resolution gains into context, consider that a CBC circle has a radius of approximately 12 km and an area of 452 km2. A 100 km grid cell, covering 10,000 km2, is approximate 22 times larger than a CBC circle. In comparison, the average analytical stratum has an area of 104,378 km2, approximately 231 times the area of a CBC circle. Thus, the SVC approach brought an order of magnitude increase in spatial resolution when compared to the standard approach. This increased resolution will enable finer scaled investigations into the drivers of winter bird trends (Thogmartin et al. 2004, Bled et al. 2013, Smith et al. 2015).

Estimating trends at relatively high resolution was possible by adopting spatial statistical techniques designed to share information across neighboring regions (Thogmartin et al. 2004, Bled et al. 2013, Smith et al. 2015). Employing spatial techniques also had important implications for how trend uncertainty was estimated. In the standard analysis, the uncertainty in a trend estimate was dependent upon the variation in trends across the circles within a stratum, and the number of circles in a stratum. That uncertainty did not depend on stratum size or degree of isolation. In the SVC analysis, uncertainty depended upon the variation in trends across the circles within a grid cell, and the number of circles in a grid cell, but also depended upon those characteristics in the neighborhood of a grid cell. The consequences of this difference are demonstrated in Figure 4, where isolated grid cells in the northwestern portion of the species range have trend estimates with high uncertainty, whereas large BCRs in the same region, with relatively few isolated count circles, have trend estimates with low uncertainty. If those few circles that fall within those large BCRs can be considered representative samples of that larger area, then estimates with high precision are reasonable, and certainly preferred. If those circles are not representative of the larger area, then estimating trends for smaller areas, in neighborhoods with more information, and basing uncertainty estimates on the amount of local information, seems more appropriate.

On a standard laptop computer, SVC model analysis using R-INLA, took roughly 1 hour for Empirical Bayes results and 5 hours for full Bayesian results. The standard approach, which employs MCMC, took approximately 10 hours for full Bayesian results. Had spatial statistical models been analyzed using MCMC, processing times would have been much, much longer. The difference in computing time was due to R-INLA producing highly accurate approximations of Bayesian posteriors, orders of magnitude faster than MCMC (Rue et al. 2009, 2017). The obvious benefit of shorter processing times is that, for a given set of computing resources, more time periods, more distinct model forms (Link and Sauer 2016), or more species can be evaluated. Even small differences in computing time add up when analyzing counts from tens of years, for hundreds of species, across thousands of count sites.

There were, as there usually are, tradeoffs for rapid model analysis. Specifically, R-INLA is an option whenever a statistical model can be expressed as a latent Gaussian model (Blangiardo et al. 2013, Rue et al. 2017). This was possible for the model used in this analysis. However, this would not have been possible had we chosen to use the effort-correction function developed by Link and Sauer (1999, 2006) and used in the standard analysis (Soykan et al. 2016). Here, we used a single-parameter, power-law function for effort correction, because it could fit positive, negative, linear, increasing, and decreasing relationships (Butcher and McCulloch 1988), and was easily integrated into a latent Gaussian model. In contrast, the effort-correction function used for the standard approach is a two-parameter nonlinear function, which is more flexible and will better fit relationships that come to a rapid asymptote. Ideally, we would have tools for rapid analysis of spatial statistical models that incorporate the standard effort-correction function. In this choose-two situation, we erred towards rapid analysis of a spatial model with the simpler effort-correction function, because it allowed for a more robust, if slightly biased, estimate of the effort effect in regions where information was sparse. Robust estimates of effort effects are particularly important when generating trends from CBC data, as count effort varies widely across time and space (Dunn et al. 2005).

In addition to differences in model structure, there were other differences between the SVC approach outlined here and the standard approach. For instance, we chose to use a negative binomial count distribution, rather than a Poisson distribution with a normally-distributed observation-level random effect in the linear predictor (Link et al. 2006, Soykan et al. 2016), to deal with overdispersed counts, which tend to be the rule rather than the exception in wildlife studies (Kery and Schaub 2011). As described above, these two strategies have similar outcomes, as a negative binomial distribution can be related to a Poisson distribution with a gamma-distributed, observation-level random effect added (Simpson et al. 2017). Given similar outcomes, we chose the negative binomial strategy as it resulted in many thousands fewer parameter estimates.

More generally, the SVC approach described here differed from the standard approach in that it was optimized, specifically, for computing long-term, log-linear trends in relative abundance at fine spatial scales. The emphasis on long-term, log-linear trends was motivated by the needs of resource managers, who desire simple summary statistics that reflect overall population status for many species (Rosenberg et al. 2016, 2017). The emphasis on fine spatial resolution was motivated by requests from, both, researcher wishing to conduct research at relatively fine spatial scales and Christmas Bird Count volunteers, who wish to learn how bird numbers have changed over the years in their local area. Given these two emphases, we did not incorporate additional model terms necessary for creating annual abundance indices. These indices are critical for those who wish to look beyond single, long-term trends, at detailed time series that give more information about the nature of abundance changes. Creating these annual indices is done by adding an additional random effect per cell and year, and adding these effects to and . Adding this effect to the SVC model is easily done in R-INLA. This random effect could be specified as exchangeable or have spatial or temporal structure. We did not pursue these possibilities in depth because producing annual abundance indices was not a primary goal of this effort.

Despite the differences noted above, we showed that aggregate trends resulting from the SVC and standard approaches are remarkably similar in direction and magnitude. Precision at aggregate levels is also similar, if not a bit lower with the SVC approach, due to different assumptions about how precision should, or should not, be related to the spatial distribution of counts. Our results suggests that an SVC approach can produce fine-scaled trends for some audiences, without paying a large price in precision, while producing aggregate trends for other audiences. These dual benefits, along with increased computational efficiency, make the SVC approach an attractive complement to the standard approach, one worthy of further exploration.

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**Tables**

Table 1. Parameter estimates.

Parameter Posterior median (95% CrI)

0.772 (0.602, 0.941)

0.815 (0.774, 0.857)

0.025 (0.022, 0.027)

2.227 (2.208, 2.252)

SD for 1.628 (1.619, 1.638)

SD for 0.283 (0.281, 0.284)

SD for 0.047 (0.046, 0.047)

SD for 1.015 (1.009, 1.021)

**Figure Captions**

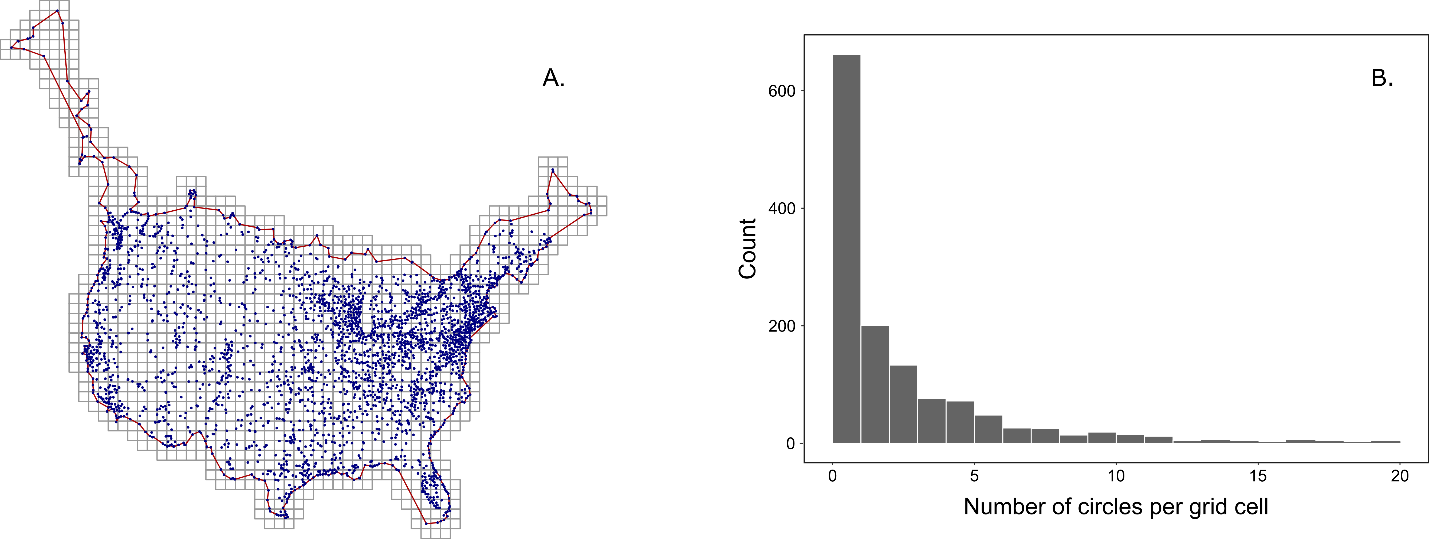
Figure 1. Grid cells used for spatial modeling of Christmas Bird Count data. Cells were uniform, with 100 km sides, and were trimmed to a non-convex hull (red line) encompassing the count circle locations (blue circles). The number of count circles per grid cell (B) ranged from 0 to 20 and averaged 2.76. Cells with 0 circles were included during model analysis but removed for subsequent assessment of resulting trends (Figs. 2-4).

Figure 2. Maps showing spatial variation in posterior medians for composite parameters (A) (alpha, 2017 relative abundance assuming 100 hours effort), (B) (effort-effect exponent) and (tau, long-term log-linear trend, percent change per year) per grid cell. For , (C) all estimates and (D) only those significantly different from 0 are shown.

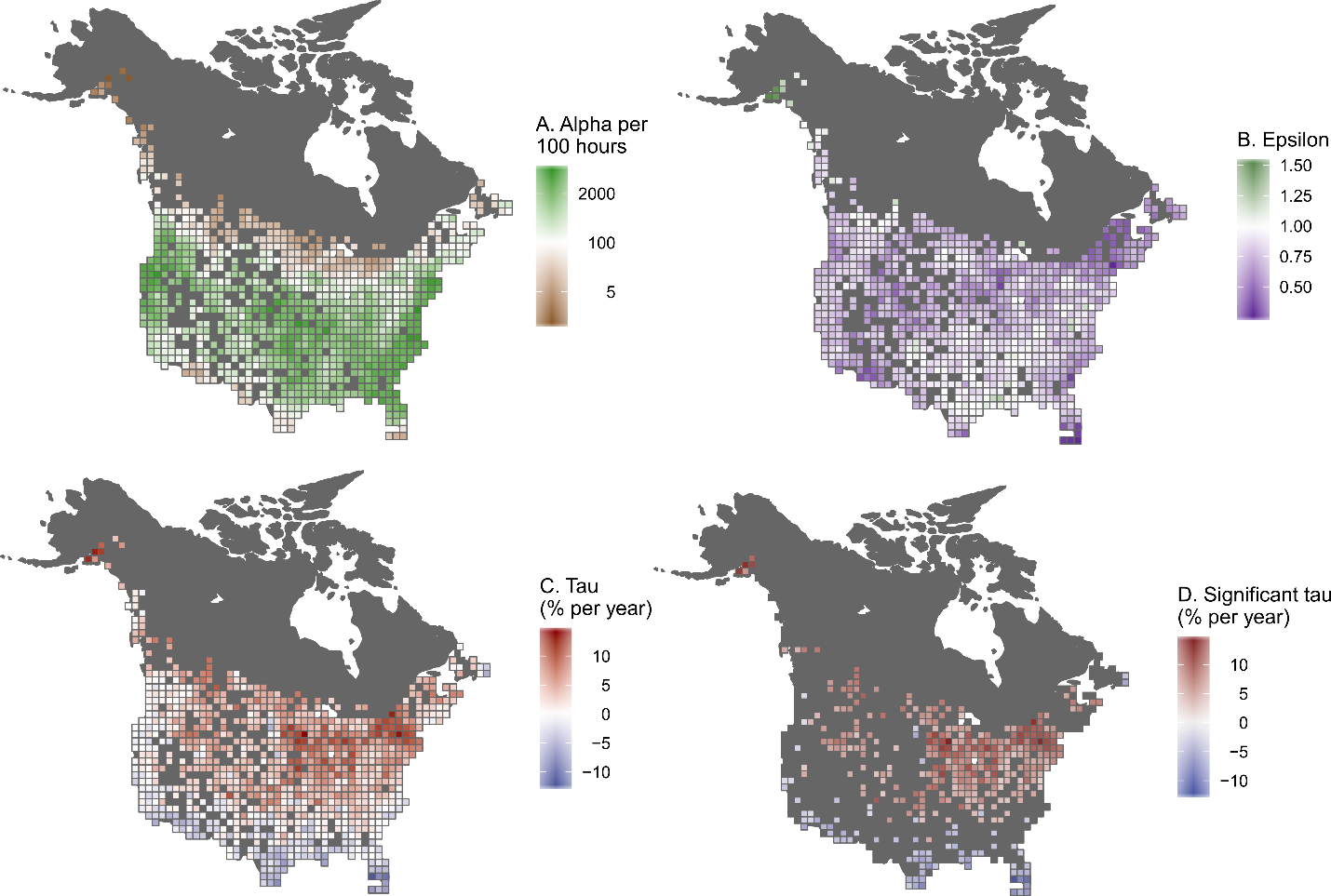
Figure 3. Comparison of posterior median trends, aggregated to Bird Conservation Regions, produced by (A) SVC and (B) standard methods, showing spatial variation in their relationships and their pairwise correlation (C). The dark grey diagonal line represents equality.

Figure 4. Comparison of 95% credible interval widths for (A) estimates of (long-term log-linear trend, percent change per year per grid cell) from the SVC model and (B) analogous trends produced using the standard analysis and aggregated to Bird Conservation Regions, shown as maps and (C) summarized with box plots.

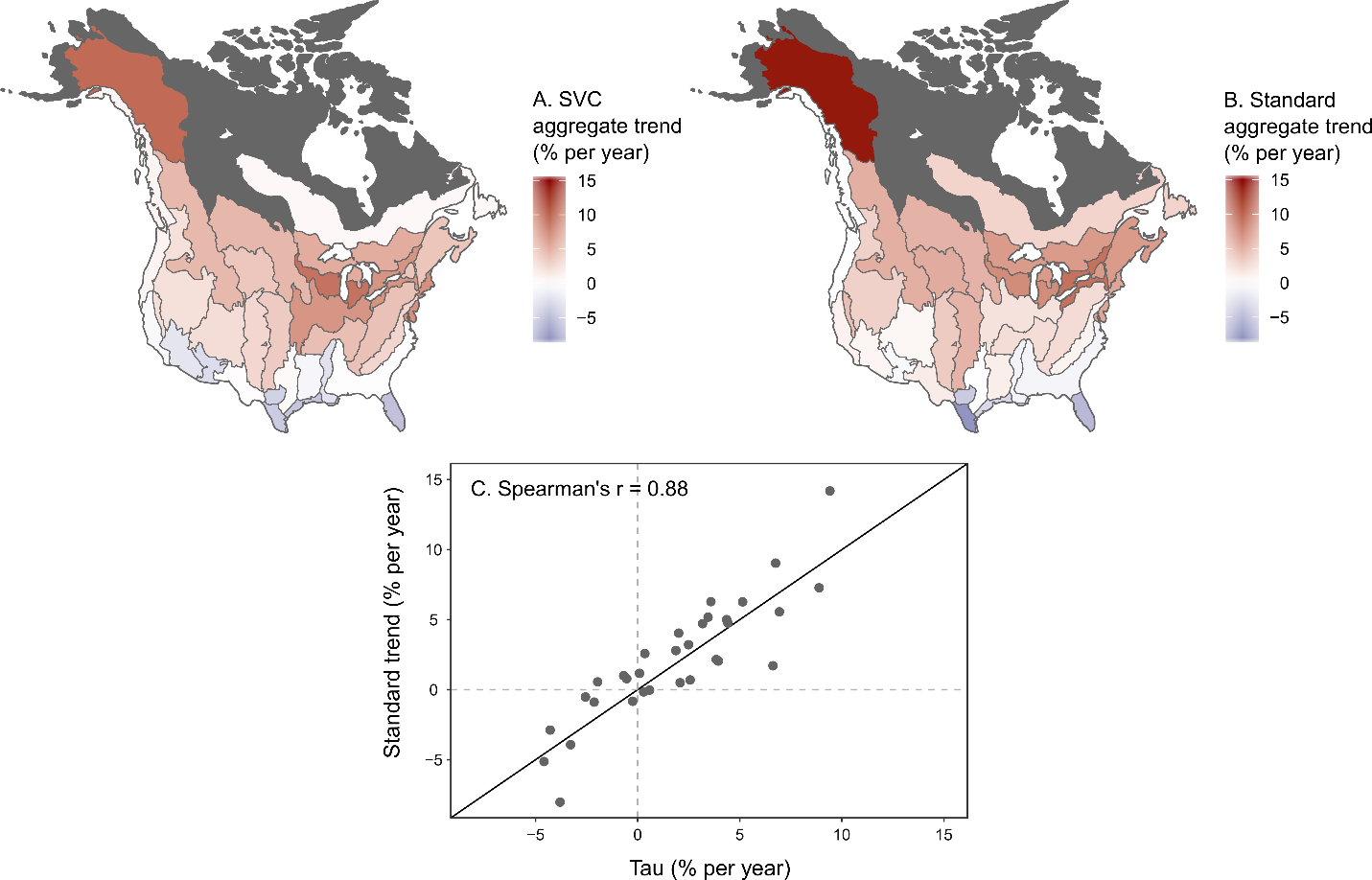
**Figure 1**

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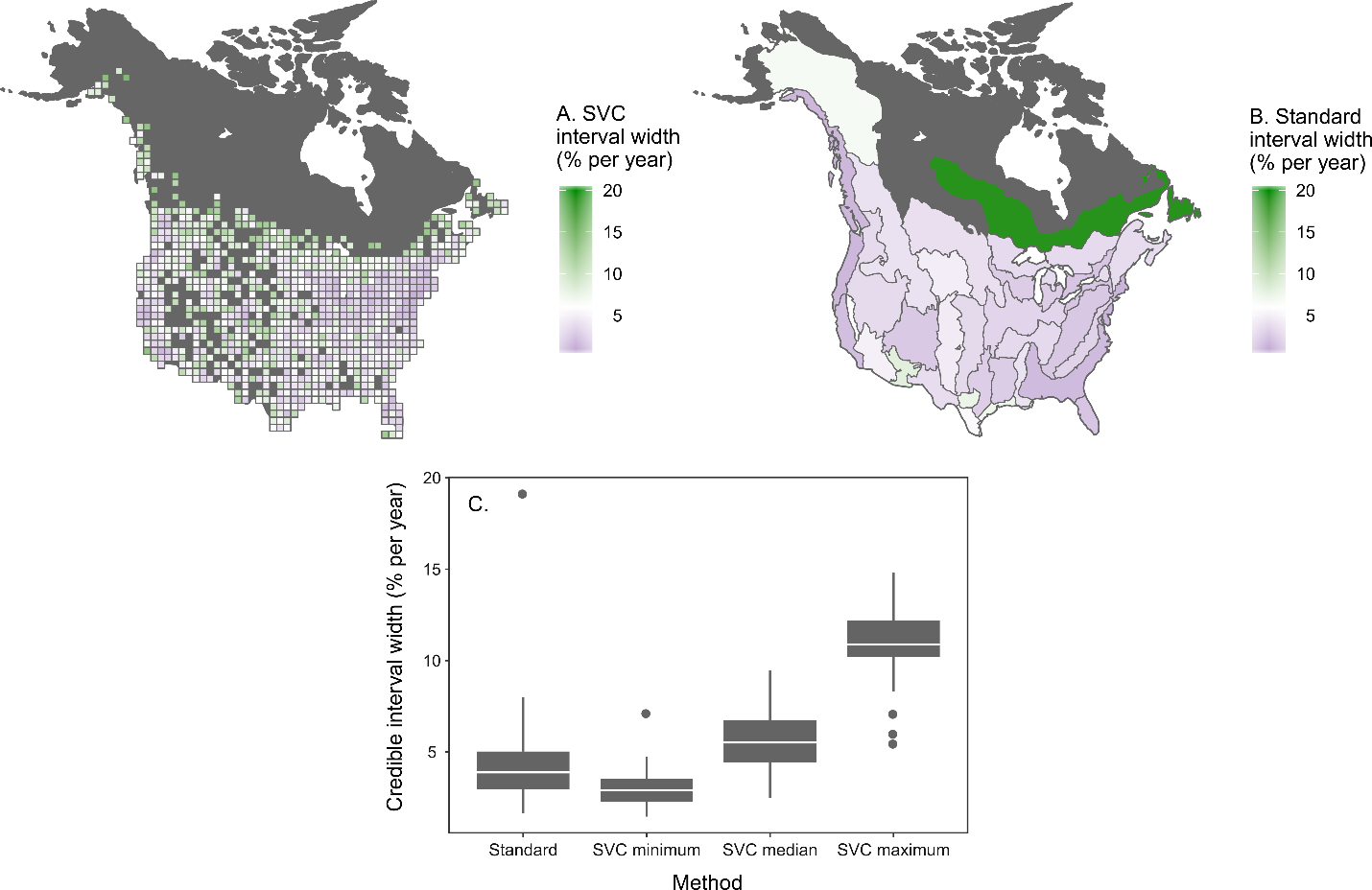
**Figure 2**

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**Figure 3.**

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**Figure 4.**

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