

WORLD SERIES OF BIRDING 1985:  
A TALE OF FIVE SWIFTS AND A ROBIN

by John C. Kricher, Mansfield

My pituitary was at it again. I knew; I could tell. This diminutive glob of endocrine tissue resting at the base of my brain was shooting its chemical signals to its henchmen, the adrenal glands. Like it or not, I was getting pumped. It was Thursday, May 16, and I was heading for Logan Airport to meet the other members of the Manomet Swifts Birding Team. Our destination was New Jersey. Our goal was to bird for Manomet Bird Observatory and to record as many species as we could in twenty-four measly hours on Saturday, May 18. Once again, as we had a year ago, we were competing in the World Series of Birding, sponsored by the New Jersey Audubon Society and the Cape May Bird Observatory. I wasn't very hungry, and my pulse rate was clearly up. Yeah, those crazy glands were conspiring to bring out the simian in me. The ancient fight response was surfacing. Let's get birding!

Manomet had done its job very well. Our team, consisting of Rick Heil, Warren Harrington, Wayne Petersen, our driver Betty Petersen, and me, had won the Ed Stearns award in 1985 and were returning to defend it this year in a field of six out-of-state teams including entries from Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, Mississippi Audubon, Bob-O-Link, and National Geographic Society. More important, however, was that MBO had attracted support for us to the tune of forty dollars per species. Our efforts promised to net considerable return for our sponsoring organization. Swift Instrument Company was again our major contributor, and bright navy blue "Swift" hats and a zoom telescope had been graciously donated to the cause.

MBO was flying us to the Garden State one day in advance of the Big Day, so we would have some time to do a bit of scouting. We were aware that some other out-of-state teams were spending the better part of the week scouting. Our work was clearly cut out for us. Betty Petersen said it best: we were preparing for a "full-scale assault on New Jersey."

The team assembled at the Piedmont counter at Logan, and we were not alone. We were to be shadowed for the entire endeavor by a television camera team from Channel 7 in Boston. None other than Robin Young had decided that the story of the Swifts would make a suitable subject for a segment on her upcoming "special." Robin met us at Logan and introduced us to the cameraman and key grip, both named John. The camera crew was to fly to Jersey with us, and Robin would join us Friday night and follow us through all twenty-four hours of the Big Day. But first, some airport footage; lights went on, tape began rolling, microphones recording. Heads on hurrying bodies turned in our direction. Who are they? A rock band? Swifts? Never heard of them. Certainly not a sports team. Say, isn't that Robin Young?

The plane took off and landed. Flights from Boston to Newark don't consume much time. Then the gremlins came out. Hertz initially refused to put us in the driver's seat. "What van? We have no reservation for any Petersen or Kricher." Calls to Linda Leddy. Who made the reservation? Finally, someone said, "Try Heil." "Heil? Oh yes, here it is. A van, isn't it?" Delay number one surmounted. But the gremlins were merely warming up.

The van was great except that the front passenger door wouldn't open. "No problem," said the friendly Hertz lady. "Just a minor adjustment." An hour later, after a mechanic disassembled, fixed, and reassembled the entire door, we drove away. Almost. We were about to enter the world of New Jersey drivers when our door mechanic noticed that the van didn't have an inspection sticker. Put one on, you say? Sorry, New York plates. Oh well, let's go for it. If we get stopped and the van impounded, so be it. We left for Princeton. The gremlins were smiling in Gremlinland.

Friday, May 17, was our scouting day. Warren had assembled a compendium of maps and directions worthy of a special forces advance team. We all had our assignments. Wayne would scout south Jersey; Rick, Betty, and I would do the Princeton area and Jersey midlands; Warren would head north. Warren was joined by Fahy Bygate, a graduate of Wayne's summer course at The Institute for Field Ornithology and our official Swifts' groupie. Fahy transported our multitudinous food supplies, many of which were her own creations, to New Jersey (all the food would have weighed down the airplane too much) and donated her car, labeled The Official Manomet Bird Observatory Team Chuckwagon, on scouting day. Scouting day went fine. The Channel 7 guys were with Rick, Betty, and me, and seemed to enjoy chasing us. The key grip wired me for sound, and I got kind of used to having a camera an inch or so from my face as I birded. We ticked off some good footage as well as staked out some good birds. All scouting reports were optimistic as we compared notes over a pasta dinner at Brigantine. But the gremlins were resting up for tomorrow.

Sleep was tough Friday night. We sacked out at 8:00 P.M. for a meager two hours before the start. High adrenalin levels refused to allow for much sleep. Mustn't let the tension relax. Robin Young arrived in time to catch thirty minutes of shuteye before we began. At 11:00 P.M. I said, "It is not yet the next day, it is still today even though we are getting ready for tomorrow, and it seems like yesterday. We are sitting here in a motel parking lot pretending it's early in the morning when everyone else around us thinks it's later in the evening." The weather seemed OK. No wind, but no stars either. Calm but overcast. A gremlin yawned. Time to get up and go to work.

We began in the salt marshes of Brigantine. About twenty minutes before midnight Wayne was explaining to a group of burly New Jerseyites in a pickup truck that we were simply listening for marsh birds. We just happened to bring along a television crew. Never leave home without them. Moments before starting time, Robin

approached me from behind the key grip's 250 watts of brilliant light with the observation that "you guys seem really tense." Guess so. With camera rolling, I muttered something about sports being "both enjoyable and challenging, and this was, after all, a sport." Probably just fodder for the cutting room floor.

Our first species were Seaside Sparrow and Laughing Gull, an inauspicious beginning. The gulls were calling from across the marsh, sounding suspiciously like so many hysterical gremlins. Soon we added Chuck-will's-widow and screech-owl. The latter, attracted by Wayne, the Rich Little of birding, had an opportunity to be on Channel 7 but just wouldn't quite come out of its curtain of foliage. At Brigantine Refuge we picked up Whip-poor-will and Marsh Wren but no rails or bitterns. We also met Alan Brady and the DVOG (Delaware Valley Ornithological Club) team who were duly impressed by how much the TV lights lit up the marsh. Our best bird so far was a Solitary Sandpiper that we audioed as it passed overhead. We heard a distant birding team doing a rather pathetic imitation of a Barred Owl. Didn't fool us and sure didn't fool the owls. Silence, except for the slamming car door of the other team.

By 1:00 A.M. we were cruising through the pinelands toward Waterloo in north Jersey. Two interesting things happened. First, we seemingly never encountered another car until we stopped to listen for owls. Then cars would appear in droves, the noise of their speeding engines drowning out our owling efforts. Were those gremlin faces behind the steering wheels? Hmmm. Then there was the rain, so little at first that we hardly noticed. Then, a little more. Then a lot! We had ten species so far.

At 2:45 A.M. I called the New Jersey Rare Bird Alert to get an update on what was reported and where. Did you know that it is indeed possible to fit both a key grip and a cameraman in a standard phone booth along with the caller? Well, it is. We stopped for gas at 3:40 A.M., and Robin commented on our impressive speed over the Jersey highways. The media car with Robin at the wheel was keeping up with us but with some effort. Robin also innocently asked if the birds come out in the rain. It was definitely not an academic question. Oh yeah, the gremlins decided to keep the gas cap from our van. We had to go back for it later.

At 4:00 A.M. we were treading water at Waterloo. Searching for woodcock in the downpour yielded nothing but wetness. The gremlins had turned on the shower. Wayne told Channel 7 that "the conditions are rather adverse at the moment." Robin put on her rain clothes. The \$50,000 video tape camera was carefully covered with a garbage bag. We walked the railroad bed at Waterloo, a place that had yielded both migrants and crucial species such as Black-capped Chickadee last year. This year there was only rain and wind. Migrants were somewhere else. We did get the chickadee, though, as well as meet several other birding teams including the Guerrilla Birding Team, last year's big winner. Each of us on the Swift team shook hands with Guerrillas Pete

Dunne, Pete Bacinski, Bill Boyle, and Dave Sibley; and both teams agreed, in a spirit of mutual respect and unity, that the weather really sucked. Rain continued unabated until about 7:30 A.M. We arrived at one of our grassland sites and nailed Savannah Sparrow, meadowlark, and Upland Sandpiper, three species that we missed last year. Scouting had paid off, and the rain was stopping. The gremlins had gone for breakfast. Our spirits were soaring, like the Turkey Vultures we were watching. One among us, in a burst of debatable reasoning said, "This is better than sex!" A gremlin chuckled.

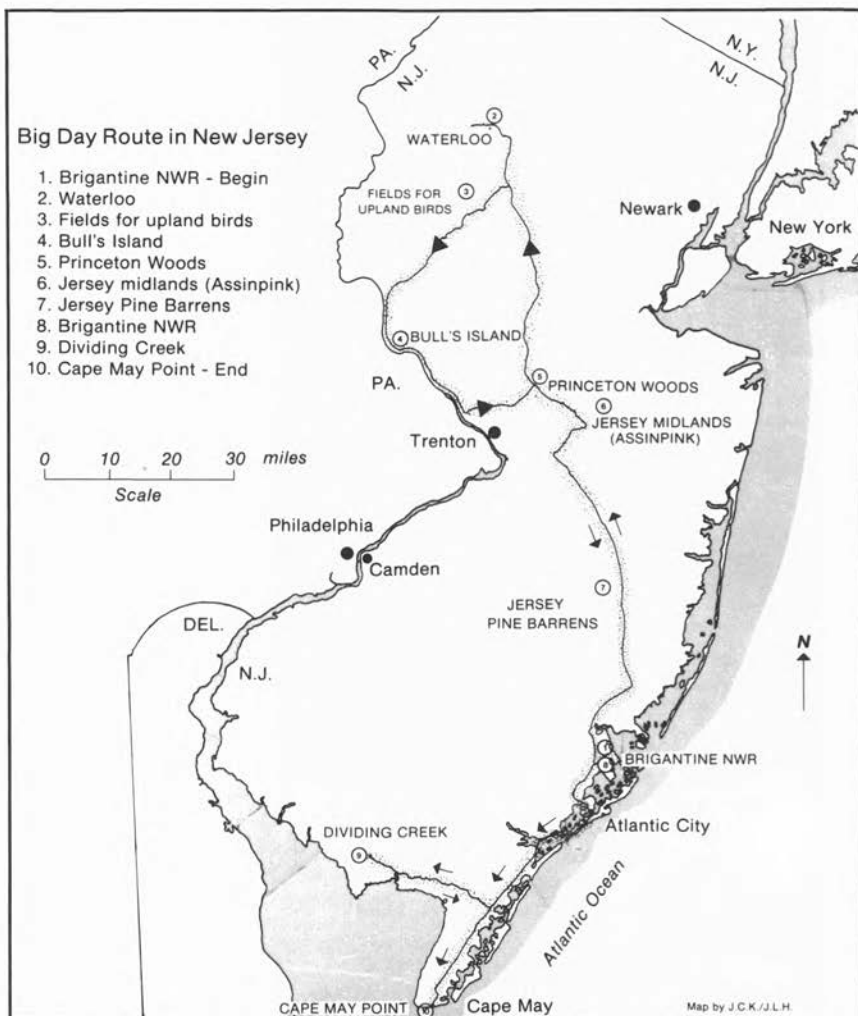
Stops at Bull's Island along the Delaware and Princeton woods were highly productive. We got Cerulean Warbler, Cliff Swallow, Acadian Flycatcher, Swainson's Thrush, Kentucky, Hooded, Cape May, and Black-throated Blue warblers as well as many others. We were hauling, and the weather, though still windy, was brighter, and it was not raining. The pace had really quickened. Robin Young, who later described her snack-filled day as "having eaten my way through New Jersey" tried in vain several times to get a drink of water. Each time, she was unable to get the water jug, pour, and drink before we were ready to head to the next stop. Try again, Robin. Have a cookie. We suspected that Robin has the metabolism of a hummingbird. As we moved from place to place, we kept running into other birding teams. This event had become popular indeed.

By high noon we were at Assinpink Wildlife Area and had gotten Grasshopper and Field sparrows. The Blue Grosbeak, so cooperative last year, failed to show. We met the Cornell Team. The gremlins finished their leisurely brunch and began their afternoon's work. The wind picked up; the birds dropped down. As we drove toward Brigantine Refuge, we stopped repeatedly to get Prairie Warbler, only one of the most common birds of the pine barrens. We couldn't buy one. Each stop cost precious time. Our devoted TV team began to realize that each stop is not necessarily a gem. They began to stay in their car. Robin kept eating. Finally, we heard the upscale zee, zee, zee of the Prairie Warbler. It was our hundredth species so far. OK, we got that one. But bluebirds? Blue-winged Warblers? Forget it.

We headed out on the dikes of Brigantine at 1:55 P.M. after a mandatory check-in at Checkpoint Linda. Linda Mills of the Cape May Bird Observatory allowed as to how our list "looked good," whatever that meant. Fran Buckley, Linda's companion, seemed more impressed by our media people than our list. Brigantine produced its usual array of shorebirds, ducks, herons, gulls, and terns. John shot footage through my binoculars and telescope - an "artsy" shot. By 3:30 P.M. we were ahead of last year's pace time-wise though not species-wise. I was tired and popped a vitamin C, the miracle drug of last year's efforts. Then the gremlins decided to finish us off.

Cars, trucks, and red lights are the field marks of southern Jersey. With John, the cameraman, hanging out of the window

behind us, we were filmed weaving our torturous route through the gamblers and sightseers of the Jersey shore. Time was evading us. We couldn't shake the traffic. Now I know how a paramecium feels when I put gum on the slide to slow it so I can study its movement. We were forced into involuntary slow motion. Trucks, vans, stretch limousines with their darkened windows, even motorcycles blocked our progress. Warren, dubbed Christopher Columbus for his navigational skills, kept us at least on the right track. Betty, driving, would ask directions, and Warren, map in hand, would respond, "We ah heah . . . and we wanna get theyah . . . . So we should go toward heah. Go left!" We finally made it to Bear Swamp along the Delaware Bay shore, only to stop at a site populated by a motorcycle club with a megadecibel tapedeck. They were having a good ole time. We heard only twang, not birds. None of us felt quite up to the job of telling them to turn down the volume. True,



we spotted an adult Bald Eagle, always a nice prize, and heard Brown Creeper, no easy bird in New Jersey. But we were losing the day. Robin and the crew were looking just slightly tired. Perhaps a quick snack, Robin . . . .

We closed out the day at Dividing Creek, listening for rails in the wind. No Soras, no Virginias, but we did hear Kings. Our total stood at 151, well below our 175 of a year ago. The gremlins had won. We knew we had lost. Our consolation prize was a gorgeous sunset over Dividing Creek, observed by virtually half the other teams who close out the day with us and duly filmed by John under Robin's direction.

We "headed for the barn" at Cape May and learned that our 151 was by no means a poor score considering the day's weather conditions. The gremlins nailed almost everybody. We ended up about in the middle of the field along with the experienced New Jersey teams though we clearly topped out in media coverage. Robin and the crew were terrific and never impeded our progress. We all had celebratory photos taken, the Swifts and the Robin. Not only that - we now know what it is that a key grip does. The highest total was achieved by the DVOC who tallied 182. They stayed mostly in south Jersey avoiding much of the early-morning weather front. The next highest score was 169. The best out-of-state team score was 163, gotten by the National Geographic team. The Guerrilla Team, last year's grand winners, did about the same as the Geographic.

We had to give up the Stearns award to National Geographic, but, after expenses, we had earned approximately \$5000 for Manomet Bird Observatory. Perfectionists that we are, however, we felt the Swifts had laid an egg. Funny thing about eggs though. This one is symbolic and has an incubation time of about a year. In it grows a fine bird, with brains, power, quickness, and experience - a different kind of swift. Next year it will open its eyes and in them will be reflected the outline of the Garden State and the figure 200. Next year New Jersey will be visited by a phoenix from Massachusetts.

[Ed. note: The adventure so vividly described in this blow-by-blow account aired on Monday, July 29 at 8:00 P.M. on Channel 7, WNEV-TV Boston as one of the four segments of a special program, "Robin Young Profiles." This well-produced (except for the mispronunciation by Robin of Kricher's name) program delighted the birders who were fortunate enough to catch the showing. Perhaps it will be repeated if enough letters or phone calls reach the station manager at Channel 7.]

JOHN C. KRICHER is a professor and chair of the Biology Department at Wheaton College. He is currently completing two books, Exploring the American Tropics, to be published by Prentice-Hall, and A Field Guide to Eastern Forests, to be published by Houghton Mifflin. He is president of the Northeastern Bird-Banding Association and lives in Mansfield with his wife Linda, seven cats, four pygmy goats, two chickens, and . . . . . a female collared peccary.