

YOUNG BIRDERS

Big Day Birding: A Change of Pace

Barrett Lawson

Birding has always been a major part of my life. My first word was "bird," so that should give you an idea of when I started. All through my elementary school years the big excitement of birding was to get a new "life bird." I was a "lister." I could get a new bird almost every time I went out, and I thrived on the thrill of seeing my life list grow. But by the time I reached middle school, the inevitable happened: new life-birds became hard to come by. At this point I entered a new phase. I made it my goal to be able to identify all the birds by myself and not to rely on adults to point them out. I made a notebook, along with my dad, and took notes on all the key fieldmarks. New life birds became less important. I drew satisfaction from improving my skills as a birder.

Although I loved to go birding any time of year, there was one day that was by far my favorite, The Massachusetts Audubon Bird-a-thon. This wasn't just another day in the field, it was an all-out race. Frantically moving from place to place, chalking up a huge list, seeing great birds, and best of all, competing against other good birders was a different kind of birding altogether, where a sense of leisure was eliminated and in its place was an intense focus.

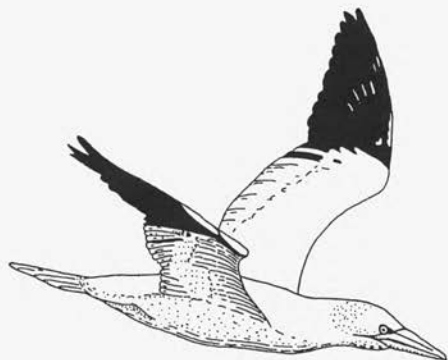
On Bird-a-thons my dad and I have gone out with Strickland Wheelock. He is an incredible birder and has been my mentor throughout the years. We have all enjoyed the excitement of Bird-a-thon so much that Strickland suggested that we do something like that every month. We would try to set a Big Day record in Massachusetts for the American Birding Association for each month of the year. The idea sounded great to me! We have followed through, and are now in our second year of doing ABA Big Days (as well as the annual Bird-a-thon).

ABA Big Days alter birding from a hobby to a sport. Just like any other sport there are specific rules and regulations that must be followed. There is a *playing field*, which is the designated state that the day is taking place in; a *play clock* of twenty-four hours, from midnight to midnight; a final *score* of total number of species seen; and a *team*, which consists of two or more people who must stay together during the day.

Just as in any sport, the quality of the players in a Big Day is very important. There is not much I can say about this. Obviously, the more experienced birders will have better luck. Another parallel to sports is the importance of strategy. In a Big Day, having a good strategy may even be more important than the skill of the birder. Developing this takes practice and experience. The more you do it, the better you become at understanding all the intricate strategies that will help add birds to your list. I feel that I have a decent understanding of how to plan and execute a Big Day.

The first thing to decide is what date you are going to bird. For any particular month, choose a day that seems most likely to yield the greatest diversity of species. For example, if you are birding in April it would be much better to have the Big Day at the end of the month than at the beginning. There would be a greater influx of migrants then. Other factors can determine optimum timing. For example, when we did our Big Day in late January 2000 we did it in the midst of a deep freeze. Everything was frozen, and we couldn't find any bay ducks anywhere. However, the next day Strickland discovered two ponds that somehow stayed open during the freezing weather. In these two ponds alone, he had fourteen species of ducks! With this concentration of birds, we then tried to do our February Big Day as soon as possible. There was an obvious advantage to getting a large number of duck species in one or two locations.


The next thing to do is to plan where you will bird. It is crucial to visit a wide variety of habitats. Massachusetts birders are fortunate because we have an ocean coast. No matter in what month you are doing a Big Day, coastal stops are important. Shorebirds, ducks, alcids, gulls, or terns fatten up the list. Be sure to include all the other obvious habitats — marshes, open fields, thickets, forests, and ponds. One thing that you might try is to take a checklist and mark all the species you think are possible on the date of your Big Day. Next, draw on your experience, and write down the best specific places you know of to find the birds that you marked. Make sure that your itinerary doesn't take you all over the state. That makes for too much driving and not enough birding.



Once you have figured out the locations you want to bird, plan your itinerary for efficient driving so that you can hit the right spots at the right time of day. Various habitats are productive at different times of the day, and it is important to be at your destinations when you can get the most out of them. One of the best ways to start a Big Day is by owling. During the waning darkness before dawn is usually the time when the owls are the most vocal, so that is the ideal time to be in owl habitat. Also, since rails call at night, it is an efficient use of time to go after these birds in the dark also. As the sun rises and the songbirds are most active, make sure you are not at a beach with a telescope looking out at the ocean. You should be birding prime passerine locations. (Furthermore, many ocean birds, like gannets and kittiwakes, are not up and flying until later in the day.) Another thing to take into consideration is the tide. You will get the most shorebirds close up when the mudflats are becoming exposed during an outgoing tide.

The final strategic consideration is timing your stops. Once you have your itinerary, try to allot a specific amount of time for each area. At the end of the day all

itinerary stops should be completed, with no extra downtime. But flexibility is necessary because a destination may be more productive than anticipated (or less). And the time you spend there should be adjusted accordingly. Also, don't get hung up searching for a particular species. If you have already scanned through a large flock of Semipalmated Sandpipers looking for a Western, it's not worth it to check it a second or third time as you might on a regular day. Accept your loss, and move on.

With all the different considerations to take into account for a successful Big Day, it may sound like a daunting task. But if you are feeling energetic, it is a day of birding like no other. The rewards have been great. Every month I get a broad view of the bird activity in Massachusetts. This allows me to gain a greater knowledge of habitat preferences, migration patterns, and populations of birds. I remember on November 6 that every time we looked out from a coastal stop there were streams of Red-throated Loons migrating south. And how on March 25 at the same stops we saw gannets moving north. On October 9, finding Rough-winged Swallows at Great Meadows was exciting because they were probably the only ones left in New England. A Big Day makes you consider things more carefully. It forces you to ponder every option and appreciate everything you see. 

Barrett Lawson, age seventeen, is a junior at Concord-Carlisle High School. He is an avid tennis player, and has played on the varsity team since freshman year. Last year Concord-Carlisle won the State Championship. Music is his other main interest. He plays cello and electric bass. He is now starting to look at colleges. Bowdoin and Colby are promising because they both have ornithologists in their biology departments.

[Editor's note: Barrett was six when he participated in his first Bird-a-thon, and since then he has raised over \$47,000 for the Massachusetts Audubon Society.]



Barrett and birding buddy Strickland Wheelock scanning for sea ducks at Halibut Point during a Big Day (photograph by Bob Lawson)

