

Big Day Birding: A New Massachusetts Record

Bob Lawson

In our third or fourth year of trying to set a new Big Day Record for Massachusetts in the month of May, we finally did it – by one bird! (ABA rules go from midnight to midnight, so most Mass Audubon Birdathons, when we only birded from 6 p.m. to 6 p.m., could not count as attempts.) The previous record was 161 species, and the best we have ever done was 156. On Memorial Day, May 27, 2002, we got the magic number of 162. The birders were Strickland Wheelock (the man with the plan), my son Barrett, and myself. Here is our story.

Early Morning

At 2 a.m. Strickland, Barrett, and I pulled into the parking lot at Bolton Flats, and opened the car door to hear a Swamp Sparrow singing. It was mild and humid, with the full moon shining behind a layer of mist. The birds were in a singing mood. A Willow Flycatcher was vocalizing, and a Woodcock beeped from across the road. A Great Horned Owl began calling, and before long we heard several Screech-Owls calling. We also picked up Virginia and Sora rails, but no bitterns or nighthawks. We proceeded to the Old Rifle Range in Concord, but got zilch from our semi-reliable Barred Owl. Not to fret, we were on our way to Crooked Pond, which we felt certain would produce a Barred Owl for us.

We arrived there in plenty of darkness, and heard three or four Barred Owls. There were pools of water in the trail, and we were finally cut off by a flooded area, where we got a Louisiana Waterthrush singing. We took a new upland fork, which proved to be a great place to be as morning light first appeared. We had Veery, Wood, and Hermit thrushes singing, and then a Swainson's Thrush sang, which was the first time I had ever heard one sing in the East. We were feeling pretty good despite the lack of Ruffed Grouse drumming. We were picking up Blackburnian and other warblers, Yellow-throated and Blue-headed vireos, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Pewee, and more. As we were departing, Barrett remembered that we had ditched a flashlight along the way, so he ran back for it. I thought that the mistake was at least good for his endurance training, but it also worked out well for our bird list; he picked up kingfisher and Green Heron. The Green Heron would be our only one of the day.

Newburyport Area

On to Newburyport, with a quick stop at Uptack Road. The power line break at Uptack Road was not up to Strickland's expectations, and he made a point of reminding me of this for the rest of the day. Personally, I enjoyed getting our only Prairie Warbler and Red-bellied Woodpecker of the day, but what can I say. Our next stop was in an area behind Cherry Hill Reservoir where a Golden-winged Warbler had been reported for the past several days. We picked up it on cue, as well as other birds. We drove by a field where there was a magnificent male turkey strutting his stuff out in the open, with two females lurking along the sides. He put on a spectacular show,

with his tail fanned out in a full circle. At first glance, he looked like a piece of wind-powered farm equipment! We moved on to get the early-morning warblers on Plum Island, but when we saw that the tide was dead low, we decided to make a quick foray for shorebirds instead. We waded out and picked up Dunlin, dowitcher, and other shorebirds.

Arriving on Plum Island, we made our way to Hellcat, picking up Purple Martin, Gadwall, Wilson's Phalarope, Common and Least terns. We trekked around Hellcat, but our most memorable stop on Plum Island was at The Pines. There was a good little flurry of birds here, including our only Black-throated Blue Warbler of the day. Then Barrett spotted a large lump on top of a horizontal pine branch, which proved to be a sleeping nighthawk. Strickland scraped an arrow in the walkway with his shoe to mark the spot for other birders. Then, on the backside of the circle, we had beautiful looks at a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher. Feeling rather pumped, we proceeded down to Stage Island where Strickland picked up a far-off hard-to-spot Green-winged Teal. He followed that act with a impressive detection of a Mourning Warbler song along the side of the road. At the end we picked up Piping Plover and Black Tern. Strickland and Barrett took the upland trail toward Emerson Rocks and got an Alder Flycatcher. At the beach we got Sanderling and Oldsquaw.

On the way out we made a second stop at Hellcat. Then we attached our Brown Thrasher deflector and made our way to the entrance where we would try to hear the Clapper Rail that was reported. We not only had success with the rail, but a guy there asked us if we had seen the Tricolored Heron at the Maintenance Shed. (He also asked us if we had heard about the Nighthawk.) We flew back for the heron, and found a skinny neck and head sticking up over the far embankment.

On to Newbury. We ventured into the tidal grass on Old Pines Road and flushed lots of Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows, but no Seaside Sparrows. We did have a bonus bird, however, when a Black-billed Cuckoo called from the distant grove of trees, then we picked up Cliff Swallow at the bridge. In Rowley, we pulled into Stackyard Road and picked up Mute Swan and the guaranteed Orchard Orioles, and proceeded toward Cape Ann.

Bust

Right about now, we were realizing that we were in great shape! We had all our target owls and rails, and a great start on the flycatchers. Our goal seemed entirely realistic. It was only shortly after noon, and we had more than 130 species. We had twelve more hours and needed only 32 more birds! We checked our list, and made an executive decision to forget about spending the later part of the day on the South Shore as planned. We felt that there were more unique species to be found at the Quabbin area. And we had plenty of time, right? Wrong!

Going to Cape Ann almost proved fatal. Two days earlier, Strickland and Barrett had done some scouting up there, and it seemed probable that we could pick up seven or eight new species. As it turned out, we got only three. Moreover, the driving took forever. Our progress on the little winding road down there and on the roads on Cape

Ann was slow – especially getting mixed up in traffic in the Rockport area on Memorial Day. All we got was Surf Scoter, Common Eider, Great Cormorant, and Rough-winged Swallow.

Feeling duped as we headed south on Route 128, we vowed to omit Cape Ann next year. But we weren't too discouraged. Barrett and I had scouted Hanscom Airfield and Great Meadows also on Saturday, and we had some goodies to look forward to there. Along the way we kept our eyes peeled for raptors, because this was a group of birds that had eluded us. We had none! I say that we kept our eyes peeled, but actually the only eye activity Strickland had was in his dreams. The truth be known, he was sleeping like a baby. Until Barrett shouted out "Red-tail!"

The bust continued. We arrived at the Bedford end of Hanscom, but no sign of the Grasshopper Sparrow which had been singing on Saturday. No Fish Crows. Just lots of plane and helicopter activity. On to Virginia Road. Bust. There were huge lawn mowers where there had been Upland Sandpipers. You have to be concerned about their nesting habitat! Strickland finally spotted a pair of kestrels. Wow, one bird!

On to Great Meadows. No new birds. The Bufflehead that had been there was gone. Same with the Ring-necked Ducks. No sandpipers. Nothing. Only Dick Walton, up on the tower videotaping activities at a kingbird nest and oriole nest. This was getting ridiculous, almost pointless. It was now close to 5 p.m., and we had only gotten six species since leaving the Newburyport area. Our great position had become dismal. I said that we should reassess whether it was even possible to break the record at this point. Did we want to push on? Strickland, similarly, had a pretty discouraged look on his face. Thank goodness for youth. Barrett wouldn't hear of it. Strickland and I quickly fell into line and, without missing a beat, we were heading west on Route 2.

Fourth Quarter Head of Steam


The rest of our story was a series of surgical hits, with a wee bit of luck thrown in. We were heading to areas where we knew what to find and where to find it. On the ride out Route 2 we looked out for raptors, but saw not even a Turkey Vulture! Then we had two lucky hits when we got off the highway: a Broad-winged Hawk circling over the trees and a Pileated Woodpecker flying across the road in front of us. First surgical stop was the parking lot on the road leading up Mount Wachusett, where we got our junco with little problem. The sapsucker didn't materialize, but he has been unreliable anyway. Strickland made up for it by bringing us up to the chairlift break where he knew of an Indigo Bunting nesting – beautiful bird!

On to Barre Falls Dam. We got the bluebird on cue in the Bobolink field, and the ravens croaking from under the bridge near the dam. (Good to know that they seem to actually have their nest under there, for future reference.) We then got the *che-bek* at the *che-bek* spot, and the White-throated Sparrow at the White-throated Sparrow spot. The Red-breasted Nuthatch and Golden-crowned Kinglet seemed to be waiting for us, but the Winter Wren was a disappointing miss. Fortunately, we made up for it by getting the Northern Waterthrush in the expected swampy spot, plus a bonus Yellow-

rumped Warbler. The Evening Grosbeaks have not been seen out on Cold Brook Road this year.

We took stock of where we were, and figured we needed only a couple more species to break the record. Evening was coming on. Strickland said there were two possibilities: shoot over to the Uxbridge sewer beds for our needed Solitary and Least sandpipers and Lesser Yellowlegs, or head to Brookfield Marsh and go for bitterns. We decided on Brookfield. Strickland "led" the way. Maybe I should say he struggled to find the way. We got a bit lost out there in the vast heartland of Massachusetts, and the sun was getting lower. But I was enjoying the ride. The weather was mild and clear, and the scenery was beautiful. We were traveling through many lovely small towns of central Massachusetts, where time seems to have stood still for the last fifty years. As we passed fishermen along the sides of small lakes, I was thinking to myself: what a wonderful scavenger hunt this Big Day birding is.

Barrett discovered that Common Eider had not been checked on the list (E for error!) and that we had therefore already tied the previous record. The search for Brookfield marsh continued. (I was surprised at the end of the night to learn that Strickland actually had a map in the car. I guess he is that rare breed of man who would rather ask directions than use a map.) But to his credit, we actually made it with lingering daylight as we drove down alongside the railroad tracks to the middle of the vast marshland. Upon opening the door, we heard the pumping of the American Bittern. A new ABA record for the state of Massachusetts! Least Bittern never called, and we tried some longshots like Yellow Rail and Sedge Wren, but heard nothing. We figured we might as well try to put a little more margin on our victory, so we headed to the sewer beds in Uxbridge, to see if we could get sandpipers in the dark. We checked out most of the pools with our huge owl light, but not a bird was to be found. We would settle for a narrow victory, and a stop at Burger King. We arrived home at 11:20 p.m.

Next year we are going to try the super-duper ultimate plan 

Bob Lawson and his oldest son, Barrett, live in Concord, Massachusetts. For the past twenty-two years Bob was the owner and manager of BlueJay Recording Studio, which served the needs of local musicians as well as international acts such as Billy Joel and Yo Yo Ma. In 2001 Bob sold the studio, and now devotes his time to his small record label, which features an award-winning series he produced called The Kids Collection of Greatest Classics. Bob is coauthor of the Birding by Ear series (Peterson Field Guides). Barrett is a sophomore at Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine. He has been an avid birder since he was a toddler. From kindergarten through senior year in high school, he raised over \$60,000 for Mass Audubon's annual birdathon. He is currently focusing his studies on economics and biology-ecology. Aside from birding, his favorite activities are music and tennis. Strickland Wheelock has been leading domestic and international birding trips for Mass Audubon's Drumlin Farm, Joppa Flats, and Stony Brook Wildlife Sanctuaries for the past fifteen years. Strickland is an active bird bander in the Uxbridge area and a member of the Forbush Bird Club. When not birding, Strickland is president of Wheelock Textiles, manufacturing specialized textiles for several niche markets.

Editor's note: The previous official Massachusetts big day record was May 25, 1987, held by G. d'Entremont, D. Brown, and S. J. Dinsmore.