

Contributors

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Further Afield

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Prepare yourself for what awaits as we descend, step by step, into the forbidden realms of the politically incorrect. A new taboo has arisen: a pursuit formerly celebrated is now, at least in some circles, cast aside with only a supercilious backward glance as acknowledgment. It would seem that I have become something of a birding dinosaur, and perhaps you have too, for you see, I have always been, and always hope to be...please forgive me...a state lister. Yes, a lister of birds seen in Ohio! And horror of horrors, I enjoy it! I gain knowledge and satisfaction from it! The challenge drives me to broaden my birding horizons, and I offer no excuses for it. True, I may be a dinosaur, but at least I know I am not the only one surviving. So, for those nonconformist souls who remain, who have read thus far without running screaming into the night, in this column I hope to pass along some tips based on my 30 years of Ohio listing experience, so that others might build substantial state lists of their own. If they dare.

In truth, I fail to understand what I sense as a negative undercurrent about listing. This undercurrent is far from pervasive, but it does exist, and its existence baffles me. After all, listing is really nothing more than record keeping. Goal-oriented record keeping, perhaps, but still only an accounting of what has been accomplished. There is much to be gained from listing, but listing only for listing's sake seems a rather hollow pursuit to me. Seen for what it *can* be, as an impetus to furthering our knowledge and understanding, listing is truly a means to an end. But a fun one. I happen to like fun.

So what is entailed in a "good" Ohio list? A good list is whatever you have right now. A better list is what you will have after adding another species to it. And some more after that. I believe the best goal to have is always to resolve to want *more*. Be happy with whatever total you're at, but always acknowledge that it can be better. At the moment, the official Ohio Bird Records Committee list stands at 410 species, representing all wild bird species reliably known to have occurred in Ohio. At about three-quarters of that total, 300 species is a natural and traditional goal for many Ohio birders. To reach the 300 plateau shows a solid level of accomplishment; if you reach 300, and know how you did it, consider your dues paid. But to me, 300 should only be the first goal, not the primary goal. Some folks might reach 300 and then sit back and relax, propping their feet up on the purple sandpipers and Connecticut warblers that have already passed through their binocular fields. Any further enjoyment and challenge (and brown-headed nuthatches) might pass them by because they have already reached their goal of 300 species. But let us not stop there. Once past 300, how high might an Ohio list grow? I feel 325 is a better standard for the true veteran; and every five species thereafter get proportionally more difficult. 330? I would say at least 15 birders have lists of that magnitude. 340? The air is getting thin. 350? Yes, a few, but only a few, are out there. 360? Maybe someday.

If 300 sets a standard initial goal, how long might it take to reach this level? Of course, that would depend on how active, how determined, and how fortunate we might be. Five years of active birding, with this goal in mind, should be enough,

especially if enough trips to Lake Erie are made. But keep in mind that very active birders can expect to tally 250-270 birds every year within the state, and that certain maniacal listers can (and have) reached into the 290s in a given year. So it seems 300 does not necessarily have to be a long-term goal; with intensive effort it can be reached in two to three years.

The important thing to remember is to move at a comfortable pace, where you are challenged, but not overtaxed or easily discouraged. It's really not *that* important (yes, I am biting my tongue). Have fun, and the birds will come, along with the experience, and the knowledge.

So where to begin? Several basic tenets come to mind for those interested in Ohio state listing. The first is to start young. My parents started me very young. Some years ago my weird older brother (correction—my *weirdest* older brother) bestowed upon me as a gag gift a photograph of myself, taken at age two, as I peered through a pair of binoculars (no, not the same binoculars I use today). At the bottom of the photo, he placed a label "Young Robby sights a *Turdus migratorius* and a legend begins." I don't know about the legend part, but it does show how familial encouragement can go a long way. If at all possible, start young.

However, if it has come to your attention that you are no longer young, then start when you are old. Anywhere in between is also acceptable, given that the sooner you begin working earnestly on a state list, the more chances you will have to pin down any true rarities that might come along. And rarities—lots of them, if you can manage it—are the difference between a middling and a good list. Don't assume that any rarity will appear again sooner or later—in fact, they may never appear again in Ohio during your lifetime, or at least may never be "chaseable" in that span. If we look back over the past 50 years (an extremely venerable birding career, and one only a few can hope to attain) from January 1952 through December 2001, a quick review shows us that 16 species on the official OBRC Ohio list have not been seen during that period, but only prior to 1952. Of the 385 or so species seen in the past 50 years, 10 have not been seen in the most recent 25-year period of January 1977 through December 2001. The moral here is, if a true rarity appears as more than a mere fly-by, chase it. If you go, you might see it; if you don't go, you certainly won't. And you might not get another chance anytime soon.

The second basic tenet is to study, and not just by reading the latest "all-time greatest" field guide to appear. Be willing to bird your local area thoroughly—very often and year-round. Beat the bushes. It is very possible to learn your "local patch" better than anyone else on the planet. And don't always follow the crowds; be willing to go places where others haven't gone or won't go. The more familiar you are with what is to be expected, and when, and in what numbers, the more prepared you will be should something unexpected appear. Once your observations are recognized as something out of the ordinary, you will be better prepared to document, and if necessary defend, them to well-meaning but understandably skeptical peers.

The third tenet is to hit the hotspots, and hard. There is no better way to rack up a generous supply of rarities than at a really hot hotspot. The best of these are typically along Lake Erie, and often involve particularly productive mudflat habitat. Top-notch mudflats are a scarce commodity in Ohio, and tend to be relatively or very short-lived at peak productivity. If such an area develops (or—and here is a shocking thought—is developed) along Lake Erie, plan to spend as much time there

as humanly possible. The parade of migrants is constantly changing, and rarities are drawn to mudflats like Hinckley attracts buzzards. If such a habitat remains productive over the full course of a fall migration, determined and experienced mudflatters may expect as many as 25-30 species of shorebirds there, over one-third of which can be considered at least uncommon. Really creative birders can probably find even more species, whether the birds were actually there or not. And we haven't even mentioned the unusual gulls, terns, waterfowl, etc. that also tend to appear. Hotspots are also key because they are heavily birded; with more birders in the field, more rarities are discovered. Hopefully, some of those other birders will let you know when a rarity is about.

And this is where tenet number four comes in handy. Make contact with other birders. Try as often as possible to go birding with friends; if you don't have any friends, obtain some. Share expenses, share experiences, share the love of the game. More sets of eyes and ears can only increase the odds of finding a rarity. As the Beatles once said, "I get high with a little help from my friends." I feel confident they were referring to state listing. Also, in a small group there always seems to be someone who has the uncanny knack of being in just the right spot when a rarity flies in; you will want to be around when that person walks right up and finds that black-headed gull that you've just spent hours looking for. Be *very good* friends with such a person. Another group that deserves more of our attention is the beginners. It should go without saying that if we can encourage budding birders, all of society benefits. But I hope I am preaching to the choir here. Actually, what I am referring to is something a bit less obvious, and is something that only beginners can have—beginner's luck. Whenever cosmic forces come together to bestow this blessing on the uninitiated, it can instill a lifelong appreciation in the bestowee, and also in you, if you happen to be standing nearby when that black-headed gull appears and lands on their tripod. Why this sort of thing happens I don't know, but I've seen it happen over and over again. It's real. Bird with beginners.

Tenet number five is one that I've dealt with in a previous column. *Listen* to the birds. They identify themselves with their vocalizations. A quick perusal of my personal state list reveals that I initially identified about ten species by sound before I saw them; a bit of subsequent searching then pinned them down. This illustrates how easily I might have walked right by without noting them at all. I also feel confident that several species not yet on the official OBRC list will eventually be initially identified by voice. Western wood-pewee, fish crow, and Cassin's sparrow all come to mind. I'd venture to guess they've all been here already, but have simply been overlooked (or overlistened). Whether in a woodlot near the Ohio/Indiana border, along the Ohio River, or in a weedy field two and three-quarters miles south of wherever, they just might be coming to a neighborhood near you.

You now know every secret of building a large Ohio list. Start now. Do your homework and do your home territory, while also hitting the hotspots. Listen while you work. And if you can find some like-minded folks to do it with, so much the better. I hope to have more specific tips for finding many of the tougher species in a future column, covering when, and where, and how. Now if someone will kindly tell me how to find a western kingbird, or yellow rail, or long-tailed jaeger...but then perhaps I just need to find some beginner to stand next to. Or maybe obtain some better friends. 🐦