

Some Thoughts on Big Days

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If you chose to read this article, then you probably know what a Big Day is. Some of you may be old Big Day warhorses, tried and tested over the years, while others may be young upstarts looking to future glory and fame. In case you have never heard of a Big Day, the concept is this: a team of birders (usually 3 or 4) locate and identify, by sight or sound, as many species of birds as possible within a pre-determined geographical boundary over a single day. The American Birding Association publishes worldwide results of these endeavors in their annual Big Day Report. State and provincial counts receive the most attention, but more and more people are doing Big Days by month, by county, head-to-head competitive Big Days, and "Big Sits," in which birds are counted from a single site during a single day. A standard state Big Day takes place over 24 hours, from midnight to 11:59:59 p.m., all within a given state's borders. Many individual accounts of these adventures have been written up over the years, and often are great reads. In this piece, however, I will share with you some key strategies for successful Big Days, identify a few common pitfalls, and hopefully aid you and your team in focusing on the right ideas for your next Big Day run.

I have Tom and Bob Kemp to blame for getting me hooked. The Kemp brothers are a household name in the Big Day world. Each year it seems, when the ABA publishes its Report, their names are found on more and more pages. The Kemps have been the common denominator in broken Big Day records in Michigan, West Virginia, South Dakota, and Pennsylvania. I was lucky enough to be the third member of the Pennsylvania team a few years back (it has since been broken again by locals). Tom and I also hold monthly Big Day records for a number of months in Ohio. Bob Kemp was an integral part of the team that recently broke the North American Big Day record in Texas (258 species!). We have fallen just short of records in other states and provinces as well, but still managed to compile lists respectable for out-of-towners (and good enough to cause panic among the local teams!). In other words, I have been lucky enough to learn from some pretty accomplished Big Dayers!

In speaking with Big Day aficionados across our fruited plain, the single attribute of successful or record-breaking attempts that rings loud and clear in virtually every case is organization! A Big Day is a *highly organized, well-planned* race to identify as many species as possible. Far too often, teams make the mistake of simply driving around to a number of birding hotspots, and listing everything they identify. Organization of a Big Day should be broken down into categories: route, timing, scouting, list management, and time management. These are not the only factors of course, but are mentioned time and again by those teams that hold the trophies.

A team's route is arguably the most important aspect of any Big Day. As Giff Beaton (Georgia Big Day Record-holder, as well as member of the North American record team) says, "no amount of scouting, luck, management, or good timing can

save a bad route." Your route will depend on the time of year you are attempting a Big Day. If you were looking to run a January Big Day in Ohio, your route will be significantly different than if you were trying to break the state record of 205.

Let's take as an example an attempt at a record run at the Ohio record, which would take place in May, to coincide with the peak of spring migration. There are two components to a May route in Ohio, the north and the south. Considerable time must be spent along Lake Erie, especially in the western marshes. Ducks, shorebirds, and other waterbirds are all targets here, and your route must go through good habitats for these species. The southern half of the route is more open to interpretation and freelancing, but the concept remains constant: that is, to *add to the northern species the southern birds you can't normally find along the lakeshore*. Species like summer tanager, Carolina chickadee, northern mockingbird, and a host of southern-breeding warblers are examples.

Perhaps surprisingly, a successful route during the peak of spring migration is based on breeding and/or territorial birds, not spring migrants. This is a very important clue for teams just beginning their Big Day careers. A route should be scheduled around the breeders, letting the migrants come as they may. A common mistake for new teams is spending too much time at migrant traps. While some time is indeed needed at a migrant trap or two, these should be relegated to mop-up duty only. *Virtually all record-breaking Big Days are worked around breeding birds that can be found and reliably re-found*. Therein lies the trick of the route; timing your stops at locations that host reliable breeders (northern and southern), and allowing some time for the migrants just passing through.

Scouting is almost as important as a good route. After a route is devised on paper, then it must be scouted as thoroughly as possible to see if it is actually viable. While all the scouting in the world may not be able to save a poorly planned route, a lack of scouting can absolutely ruin the best of routes. *You need to know exactly which birds are available on your route* (list management). Any scouting is better than none, but without question, the more scouting the better. There are different strategies for scouting different species, and it is important to be able to relocate truly "scouted" birds. For raptors, it is best to locate active nests somewhere along your route. Sometimes, scouting for raptors' nests takes place months in advance of the Big Day itself, when the branches are still bare. There may or may not yet be a bird present in its nest at the time, but it is vital to know where the nests are. Broad-winged hawks, for instance, are not normally on their nests in Ohio until late April, but it is much more difficult to find a nest when it is hidden among leaves. It is best to make careful notes on the location of every possible raptor nest site you find, and return a couple of weeks prior to your run to see what has (and has not) materialized in those nests. A raptor on an active nest certainly qualifies as a "scouted" bird, but that is pretty obvious.

Songbirds are trickier. A worm-eating warbler seen on the Magee boardwalk on 10 May is an obvious happenstance migrant, and should never be considered "scouted." However, a worm-eating warbler singing on a hillside at Scioto Trails State Park is far more likely to be relocated with some reliability. If the bird is singing or acting territorial in appropriate habitat in its known breeding range, it should be considered a scouted bird. You get the idea. *Scouting should be reserved for raptors or uncommon, rare, or difficult-to-find species*. It makes no sense to

scout red-bellied woodpecker cavities up and down your route, as finding this ubiquitous species is a virtual certainty. On the other hand, even though a red-tailed hawk may be a common species you might expect, it is important to have a nest staked out in case of inclement weather, because most red-tailed hawks don't like to fly in the rain and wind. It is best to scout marginal species along your route, those that could easily be missed without specific effort. Examples are Henslow's sparrow, blue grosbeak, and American bittern. Other marginals would be a host of ducks—while maybe not all that rare, finding a pair of redheads hanging out in a marsh somewhere would be a nice little addition to an Ohio Big Day list—and shorebirds. *In Ohio, ducks and shorebirds often make the difference between a good day and a great day.* Scouting will inevitably lead to little tweaks, or perhaps even major changes, along your route. This is fine, as long as you are decided on your route before the Big Day arrives, and confident you have enough species scouted to make your day a real hit.

Timing is key in any serious Big Day attempt. A date needs to be selected to coincide with the maximum number of species available along your route. The peak of spring migration is the logical time to attempt a record run in Ohio. While that sounds simple enough, consider how fickle and variable the timing of our spring migrations can be. Ohio's Big Day record of 205 was set on 11 May 1987. In some years, 11 May might be too early to expect the maximum number of birds. Some of the later-arriving migrants, such as the flycatchers, some shorebirds, Connecticut warbler, black tern and others may simply not be in Ohio by that date. Conversely, just a week later, migrants such as yellow-rumped and palm warblers could be scarce, and earlier possibilities like migrant golden-crowned kinglets and hermit thrushes may be gone completely. Knowing that a successful Big Day must be done at the peak of migration is one thing, but understanding the yearly variables and subtleties is something altogether different, and more difficult. If you are doing a Big Day during a month with limited bird migration, then timing is correspondingly less important.

The most important thing to remember is to time your Big Day to coincide with the most available birds on your route. A good sense of how many birds will be available may not be possible till close to the last moment. *It is best to have a range of possible dates for your run, and not a single pre-determined date out in the distant future.* This way, you will be able to select the best choice of dates based on weather, and your own last-minute scouting.

Once you have selected a range of dates, it is time to focus on the weather reports. Of course, weather is out of our hands, a matter of luck, but it is wise to pick the most promising weather day. During the spring months, waiting for a warm southwesterly breeze is important to maximize your possibilities. The best scenario is a southwesterly breeze with a low-pressure cell somewhere over Arkansas or Oklahoma. If you are extremely lucky (as in once-in-a-lifetime lucky), the weather can create fallout conditions, when earlier migrants are still around, and later migrants have already arrived. This rare overlap is the ideal situation in which to run a Big Day. Ohio's record of 205 was set under these circumstances. Species like yellow-bellied sapsucker and yellow-bellied flycatcher were seen together along the Magee boardwalk! Most experienced Big Dayers in Ohio believe that 205 is unbeatable. John Pogacnik, who (with Kirk Alexander) was a part of the record-

breaking team, offered these comments when I asked him if the record was beatable: "I'd be really surprised. Those were the days of Bayshore Power Plant, flooded fields full of shorebirds, and other hotspots that are no more."

Bill Whan of Columbus is only slightly more optimistic than most: "Theoretically, given a favorable coincidence of the important influences, including team members with excellent ears and knowledge of bird vocalizations, this number can be surpassed with a maximal route. Even given a first-rate team with flexibility to leave on any day within a two-week period, this number might be beatable only once in 10 years. I believe an extra boost can be given to such a team if the whole community of birders in the state mobilized to help them—primarily by notifying them day-to-day of the presence of critical scarce birds, nesters or not (e.g., oddballs like Bell's vireo, western meadowlark, blue grosbeak, etc., unusual late waterfowl, odd shorebirds, raptors, barn owls, yellow-crowned night-herons, etc., etc.) near a projected route. A statewide system of stakeouts would help a lot. In addition, we recommend the use of "ethical ticks," whereby a bird can be counted without disturbing it (example: we counted yellow-crowned night-heron this year by driving by dark to within 20 yards of the known and recently-scouted location of nesting birds, quietly waiting for the amount of time it would have taken us to get out, blind them with floodlights, bang on the tree-trunk to flush and identify them, then leaving without disturbing them)."

Perhaps 205 will never be broken, but if it is it will certainly fall on a remarkable weather day. *Luck with weather can make or break any Big Day attempt.*

Without question, there are other considerations when undertaking these endeavors. Good ethics is all-important on a Big Day—see the previously mentioned "ethical tick" scenario. The use of tapes is a hotly-debated topic among the birding community, and one I will not consider here except to say that it is my opinion that tapes can be used responsibly for most species. Having a good set of ears, and experience with songs and call notes, is invaluable during the warmer months, but less important later in fall and in the winter. In the "things to avoid" category, I heard of three that warrant mentioning here: looking into the sun, police, and Bellevue, OH (trains!) — (T. Kemp, B. Whan, pers. comm.). We would all be wise to heed this advice.

Birdwatchers have been doing Big Days for a long time, and I wish I had more space in this article to discuss some of the first recorded Big Days, which took place right here in Ohio in the early years of the twentieth century. Big Days offer knowledge uncommonly attained elsewhere—of the subtleties of migration, habitat preferences, and birds' ranges. In addition, and maybe most importantly, Big Days are flat-out fun. Whether you are shooting for the mythical 206, or hoping for a century-run (100 species) in March, you are sure to have a blast. While the above is certainly not exhaustive on the subject, hopefully you can take a hint or two from this article and make your Big Days a little more successful. Remember, a house sparrow counts as one species just as a Pacific loon does, and records were made to be broken!

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