



Illinois Birding Big Days Provide Challenge for the Obsessed

by Christine Williamson

There comes a point in every birder's life when the concept of "big" enters the mind. As if birding weren't intrinsically capricious and intensely frustrating enough, birders tend to put more obstacles in their paths. After a certain point in a birding life, when all of the common species, the regular nesters, the expected migrants, and the post-breeding wanderers have been ticked off a list in the home region, birders concoct new challenges. These often take the form of a Big Day Contest.

These contests set physical and time parameters, challenging a birder or a team to locate and identify by sight and sound as many bird species

as possible. The classic contests prescribe a geographic area and set birders loose there for a given amount of time to pit strategy, route planning, advance scouting, and identification skills against weather, the vagaries of bird migration, traffic, exhaustion, and sensory overload.

Imagination is the only limit to the types of big days that can be done. There are Big Days, Big Months, Big Years, Big County Years, Single Site Big Years, Big Sites (species identified from a sitting position in one location). Some birders pick a family group and concentrate a Big Year or Day ticking off species in the bird family. Most of these site

and geographically restricted events are also split up by some contestants by bird family groups.

A few birders don't restrict their geographic area. A notable example is a British Airways flight attendant who logged thousands of miles and thousands of birds in a round-the-world Big Year several years ago that was made significantly easier by the nature of his job.

Fund raising

Big contests are often associated with fund raising. Bob Chapel and Elizabeth Chato recorded 150 species in total in central Illinois on 11

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