

May 1996 and raised more than \$1,300 for the S. Charles Kendreigh scholarship fund for avian research. The Chicago Audubon Society has held a Spring Big Day Birdathon regularly to raise cash for its activities. A Lake County team comprised of Sheryl DeVore, Renee Baade, David Johnson, and Eric Walters raised \$500 in 1996 for the Illinois Audubon Society Sanctuary Fund. In 1997, Johnson, Baade, and DeVore raised \$500 for the Illinois Ornithological Society.

Some Big Events are simply the product of a feverish birder's mind, obsessed with breaking some record or even of creating a big category no one ever thought of before. Many of these contests are conducted alone, one birder against time and the elements.

### Big Day syndrome

Illinois seems especially prone to the Big Syndrome. Located away from an ocean and without much elevation, with most of its natural landscape altered by agriculture and development, Illinois birding can be frustrating after most of the regular migrants and breeders have been ticked off a state list.

It has taken all of the top ten listers in the state at least 15 years to build a statewide bird list over 365 (the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee is compiling an updated list totaling more than 400, so there's another challenge for birders).

Landlocked Illinois birders have turned to big contests for at least 45 years. Early birders, such as Chicago's famous William Dreuth, must have devised big contests of some kind to amuse themselves in the 1920s and 1930s. But the first published record of an Illinois Big Day was 24 May 1952 when Charlie Clark, Laurie Binford, and T. Kemper logged 139 species in northern Illinois. Binford and Clark experimented with Big

Days throughout the 1960s and 1970s in all seasons of the year with totals that have been fairly difficult to beat. Their summer Big Day totals of 87 in northern Illinois on 21 July 1983 and 81 on 7 August 1966 were not beaten until 12 June 1994 by Alan Branhagen and J. Donaldson. A Binford-Clark-Westcott Fall Big Day with 115 birds counted on 6 September 1965 was only beaten 27 September 1991 with a 129 species day total from Walter Marcisz, Wes Serafin, and Eric Walters. Clark, Binford, and Westcott still hold the Winter Big Day record with 66 species seen 4 January 1964. A challenge awaits!

While few Illinois Big Day records exist from the 1970s, Illinois birders seemed to have been badly infected by the big bug in the 1980s. The bug seems to be the most virulent in spring. From the mid-1980s onward, a central Illinois team, anchored by Dave Bohlen and Vernon Kleen, scoured the Sangamon and Illinois River valleys religiously every May. Other central Illinois teams popped up fairly regularly during the 1980s to provide some competition, as did a rotating host of northern Illinois teams. A team of southern Illinois birders, tied together by Todd Fink and Judy DeNeal, started spicing up the action in the early 1990s.

The central Illinois team of Bohlen, Kleen, Bob Randall, Mike Ward, and Pat Ward finally hit 175 species on 9 May 1994, soundly beating their previous Big Day best - 173 species on 6 May 1986. The nucleus of the central Illinois team, which raises money through its Big Day efforts to benefit the Adams Wildlife Sanctuary, held 9 of the top 20 Big Day totals as of the end of 1996, the latest published data. With such long experience and intimate knowledge of their chosen geographic area, the central Illinois team members were the obvious target for teams from southern and northern Illinois to beat. Southern and northern Illinois

Big Day teams have spent the ensuing years since 1994 striving to add the few birds needed to pass up central Illinois.

A southern Illinois team of Fink, De Neal, Keith McMullen, and M. Seiffert hit 173 in 1995. The team, without Fink and Seiffert, but with the addition of Dan Kassebaum, hit 175 in both 1996 and 1997. The central Illinois team of Bohlen and Kleen and Pat, Mike, and Tony Ward matched their 175 record on 13 May 1997.

A northern Illinois team comprised of David Mandell, Steve Mlodinow, John O'Brien, and Sherman Suter hit 163 on 15 May 1993. In 1994, the team added Bob Hughes and tallied 154 on a 14 May Big Day. On 20 May 1995, Mandell, Robert Hughes, O'Brien, and Sebastian Patti managed 173 for a Big Day team total and on 11 May 1996, hit 174 with the addition of Steve Bailey but it wasn't until 17 May 1997 that the same team, with Mlodinow, finally beat the record with a team total of 176. In all, the team identified 184 species on the 1997 Big Day, but by the American Birding Association's 95% rule for Big Day competitions, the shared total, which is what counts, for the team must be at least 95% of the grand total.

### Strategies of play

While Big Day competition here in Illinois has yet to reach the fever pitch it does for New Jersey's World Series of Birding, where tactics and rare bird sightings the week before the contest are often kept strictly confidential, Illinois' three main Big Day squads each employ rather different strategies. What's most interesting about the strategy side of the Big Day game is that all three approaches seem to be working. The team totals, after all, remain neck-and-neck. Big Day strategies are dependent on the personalities on a given