

# Seasonal Highlights

## The Big Day That Almost Wasn't: Fourth Snowy Plover Record for Illinois by Dan Kassebaum

On 28 April 2001, Vicki Lang, Keith McMullen, and I planned a big day of birding in southern Illinois. Like most birders who enjoy big days, our goal was to break the old record and in this case, to establish a new high count for most species seen in Illinois in a single day for the month of April. If you've done enough big days, you can tell early on if this is going to be "the day". Few misses can be afforded, and stake-out birds had better be there when you arrive. Good weather is an obvious must, but light wind and a clear sky are also beneficial especially at night when listening for owls, rails, and goatsuckers.

Ferne Clyffe State Park is the most reliable spot in southern Illinois for Whip-poor-will and Chuck-will's-widow, and we began our day hearing both those species as well as an Eastern Screech-Owl about the din of spring peepers and green frogs. The next stop was along the Lower Cache River for rails. We heard King Rail, Sora, and Least Bittern, but no Virginia Rail — our first big miss.

Our next stop was Lake Mermet to search for Purple Gallinule. At night, Mermet is a magical place. It's amazing how vocal many bird species can be and in the case of rails, how much easier it can be to locate them by call than by physically flushing them from the marsh. Mermet rarely fails to produce. On this night, it did.

When we arrived at Pomona to listen for the dawn chorus of songbirds, we began to realize this was not going to be a record-setting day. We also knew that with waterfowl and shorebirds it can be either feast or famine. If you plan your big day too early you'll get plenty of waterfowl but you lose out on the later waves of migrant songbirds. If you plan your big day too late, you miss out on the lingering waterfowl and good shorebird habitat. By late April in southern Illinois, most everything has been drained to plant row crops for waterfowl season in the fall. If water levels are favorable there should be plenty of ducks and thousands of shorebirds. Unfortunately, water is often drained too early, leaving little if any standing water at the proper levels for any type of breeding. Every last tillable inch gets drained dry as a bone and plowed. As expected, our visit to Cypress Creek was disappointing. Lack of habitat resulted in

few waterfowl and shorebirds.

But we still had Carlyle Lake where water levels were perfect this spring for shorebirds. A few more local stops in southern Illinois for Henslow's Sparrow and Barn Owl and we would be on our way.

As fate would have it, however, we would not be going to Carlyle. Instead we would be going to Paducah, Kentucky. Rural southern Illinois is not the place for a car to break down on a Saturday afternoon, nor is it a place where a convenient solution for this situation is easily found.

Driving a gravel road in Johnson County, we hit something and blew out a tire. The tire was beyond repair and nowhere in Metropolis, Illinois, could we find a shop that carried the tire we needed so we headed for the Sears in Paducah.

Still, after the tire was repaired, we had plenty of daylight left, so in true birder spirit, we continued. We nixed the drive to Carlyle and salvaged the remainder of the day in southern Illinois. We went to Little Grassy Preserve, just southwest of Belknap near the Cache River, where we knew we'd find some good shorebird habitat. Not expecting much, we scanned the mud flats with our binoculars. That's when I noticed a pale plover at the far end of the flat. At first, I thought, Piping Plover, (*Charadrius melodus*), which is rare but not unexpected in southern Illinois. Keith got on the bird with his scope and I could tell by the tone of his voice he wasn't too sure about the initial identification. With the new Sibley guide in hand we scrutinized the bird and realized we had stumbled upon a Snowy Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*) nearly in spring plumage. The bird had a dark, thin bill compared with the breeding-plumaged Piping Plover's stubbier orange bill, tipped with black. The Snowy we saw also had a black side patch as compared with the Piping Plover's narrow, usually broken breast band.



*Snowy Plover at Grassy Slough Preserve, Belknap, Johnson County. 28 April 2001. Photo by Dan Kassebaum.*