

team and the interests and strengths of each member.

The strategy of the southern Illinois team has changed since Fink passed away and McMullen took over the scouting for the group, said Judy De Neal. "Keith McMullen has been ramrodding the scouting part of the equation. He comes down here (to southern Illinois) every weekend from the end of March and even on some weekdays until the count day," she said. "He gets to know where every bird is, how long it has been there, and what leaf we can find it on. Todd (Fink) had a fair notion of where to find the birds, but he didn't scope everything out quite this thoroughly." The southern Illinois team relies on a route that takes them through a wide variety of habitats, moving from owls to rails and bitterns by night in Saline County, to warbler in forests at Pomona or Attwood Ridge, to shorebirds, lingering waterfowl, and Bald Eagles in Pulaski County. The team finishes up in marshy wetlands in St. Claire or Madison Counties where it scoops up remaining rails, all the herons, gulls, terns, and Common Moorhen.

Southern Illinois' earlier spring means that the team has its best shot at breaking records if the Big Day is done in the first week of May, when De Neal said there's still a good chance of finding lingering ducks and early shorebirds. "You trade shorebirds for ducks down here if you do the Big Day any later," she said. The southern team doesn't typically get many of the late-arriving warblers, such as Cape May, Connecticut, and Mourning by running its Big Day in early May. "But if migration is good, we usually get almost all of the warblers," said De Neal. "The real problem can be the weather," she added. "If you don't have 100 birds by 8 a.m. because the weather is bad or the migration is very slow, then you're sunk."

Exhaustion is another factor. "Our biggest problem is stamina. To go from midnight to 10 p.m. is just too exhausting," De Neal said. The southern Illinois team stopped at 11:15 p.m. in 1997, as soon as they knocked off number 175, because the team wanted to match the record and was too tired to try to beat it.

New strategy in the north

The northern Illinois team has changed its tactics over the years and the pay-off was the record-breaking 1997 Big Day total of 176. Mandell said the team now starts in central Illinois and moves northward, reversing the pattern of predecessors in Big Day contests. Illinois has traditionally been divided into three parts for classification of Big Days - northern, central and southern - but Mandell said the lines are blurring. "We took the route that Joel Greenberg devised in the 1970s and flipped it. He used to go from north to south, but we realized that it was better to get the southern species in the early part of the day and that you could keep pushing farther and farther into Lake County (in northern Illinois), if you have time at the end of the day."

The north/central team's strategy is to spend the weeks before the Big Day scouting by telephone. "The phone scouting is as important as the field scouting, probably more so for us, because none of us can take two weeks off before the contest, like some people do for the New Jersey World Series of Birding," said Mandell. But as the team gets closer to the Big Day, the most important scouting is done by phone in the last four days. The compiler of the Chicago Audubon Society's rare Bird Alert, Rich Biss, and many others help the team stake out known sites for breeding and migrant birds, which aids in route planning.

Bailey does most of the scouting in central parts of the state. O'Brien and Mandell spend hours planning the route in the weeks before the Big Day, often arguing until 11:30 p.m. on the night of the contest.

The north/central team concentrates on breeding birds, said Mandell, assuming that many migrants will be picked up along the way as the team ticks off breeders. The group makes sure it hits sites for woodland and grassland breeders at dawn when everything is singing. People assume the team is concentrating on getting migrants along Lake Michigan, but Mandell said the team only visits two migrant traps, Jackson Park and Rainbow Beach. Because traffic is so bad in the city, the team has to get back on the road to get Lake County breeders and can't afford to waste time visiting other lakefront migrant traps, he said. "The route planning is important not only to insure good birds, but also to make sure you distribute interesting birds throughout the day. The period between 11:30 and 2:00 p.m. can be slow, so you need to keep the adrenalin moving. If you plan the route right, you can give the team little boosts, so attention doesn't drag and energy levels stay up. You also need someone to keep the peace and to be a timekeeper. You have to keep moving."

Less formal strategy

Vernon Kleen said his team in central Illinois "is still trying to figure out how to do this. We haven't found a groove that will make sure we're successful year after year. It does make us want to repeat it again and again in hopes we'll really get it right one of these days."

The central Illinois team has a fairly standard route that takes in what little really good natural habitat remains in the largely agricultural region - the Illinois River Valley, the Sangamon River Valley and Lake