

Chautauqua. The team doesn't do much advance scouting and usually plans the details of the route about half an hour before hitting the Big Day road. "We don't have as great organization as some other teams. But we have a lot of characters on the team which help us out a lot. Mike Ward beats the bushes and Dave Bohlen pushes until the last minute. It's the only time in the year we get together and it's fun. We're comfortable with each other," said Kleen.

The team does try to take into account the ephemeral wetlands, flooded fields, and changing conditions of the territory caused by the amount of rain in the season. During one year, for instance, Sand Lake near Havana will hold enough water to provide perfect shorebird habitat. In 1997, the field was dry enough for the farmer who owns it to plant corn. "Sometimes we just don't have the kind of habitat available around here for a large variety of birds," said Kleen. "Birds are concentrated along Lake Michigan, which helps out for Big Days up there, and there's deep forest and openings in southern Illinois, which help those teams. But we're more limited down here, although we never run into traffic jams."

With so much of the team's chances for success dependent on weather and migration, Kleen said they try to concentrate on finding migrant birds, since the breeding birds tend to be on territory and easier to find. Again, unsuitable habitat can limit the team's ability to turn up migrants, because there are few places where birds are concentrated on their way north.

Kleen said the team faces the same challenge everyone else on a Big Day does: Keeping energy levels constant. "Any little lapse of attention can cost the team a crucial bird or two," he said.

Why do it?

The analogy of Big Days and disease, above, was not accidental. Some people can go very far overboard in the Big pursuit game, but they have their reasons. Macklin Smith described his Shorebird Big Year in the June 1993 issue of *Birding*. "In this ennui, I again entertained the thought that my Shorebird Big Year might be an inane enterprise. Competition certainly wasn't the point - I was far, far ahead of James: four species. Neither was science the point, God knows. The point was in the pleasure of having a sustained personal mission, a special obsession that might also, just incidentally, make an impression on the birding community: namely, Macklin Smith will have seen more shorebirds in a single year than any other birder has seen or will ever see... The point was vanity, then, wasn't it? Unfortunately, I was too experienced an observer not to know it. Yet there seemed so much else at play in this enterprise, and I felt that too. I had come to feel that I wanted to hang out more with shorebirds. It felt like love."

"There's a little craziness involved," admitted Mandell. "It's a competition with yourself. A Big Day is a lot like a Spring Count and a Christmas Count rolled together and it's more sustainable than a Big Month - you can't live on that little sleep for a whole month. You don't do any real spring birding, if you're doing a Big Day. You have to scout. However, I don't function well without eight hours of sleep, but I can function just fine on a Big Day without any sleep. I love the planning as much as the execution, the strategy and gaming aspects."

"People who haven't done a Big Day can't appreciate the adrenalin rush," said De Neal. "It's the most exhausting fun you'll ever have. It's Bird Golf! One of these days, the

birds, the weather and the planning will come together and you'll have the most fun you've ever had birding. That's why I do it."

Everyone agreed that Illinois' Big Day total for spring can go higher. In 1996, the latest year of published records, when Illinois teams hit 175, out of 181 Big Days recorded nationwide, 16 totals were over 175. As of 1996, some of the state Big Day totals ahead of Illinois' were Maryland with 206, Kansas with 205, Iowa with 204, and California with 196. Wisconsin's highest Big Day total is 184.

Kleen said he thought a "200 total day in Illinois is possible if every single thing goes right." Mandell said he thought a 194 Big Day was quite possible. But he cautioned that Illinois' total will remain well below the possibilities on the coasts and in the mountains. "Those states have elements Illinois just can't replicate, water and elevation. Illinois just doesn't have the water like Iowa, Kansas, and Wisconsin do. They all get better ducks and Kansas gets the western birds we don't easily - White-faced Ibis, Black Rail and Snowy Plover."

But sometimes Illinois does reward those who try very hard. De Neal said the best Big Day her southern Illinois team ever had¹ was the night the team was playing a tape to attract Least Bittern in a strip mine subsidence area. A Black Rail answered the tape, scolding and irate. It was a life bird for every member of the team, but the reward was limited. The Black Rail refused to answer a Black Rail tape. The group surrounded the spot the bird had called from and slowly drew in the circle, with flashlights at the ready. The bird, however, fluttered off into the dark and never called again.

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