

# Breaking the State Big Day Record

by David P. Mandell

It was five minutes after midnight on 17 May 1997 and no sign of Steve Bailey. When Bob Hughes, Steve Mlodinow, John O'Brien, Sebastian Patti, and I had arrived at Parking Lot 8 of the Iroquois Conservation Area in central Illinois half an hour earlier, the sky had been clear and the air still. A Whip-poor-will sang loudly from what seemed just a few hundred feet away, and we could hear the flight notes of thrushes and warblers as they passed overhead. But now the wind had picked up, the Whip-poor-will was quiet, and there were no migrants to be heard.

Most importantly, there still was no Steve.

This was no way to start our fifth try at an Illinois big day record. We had come so close the last two years

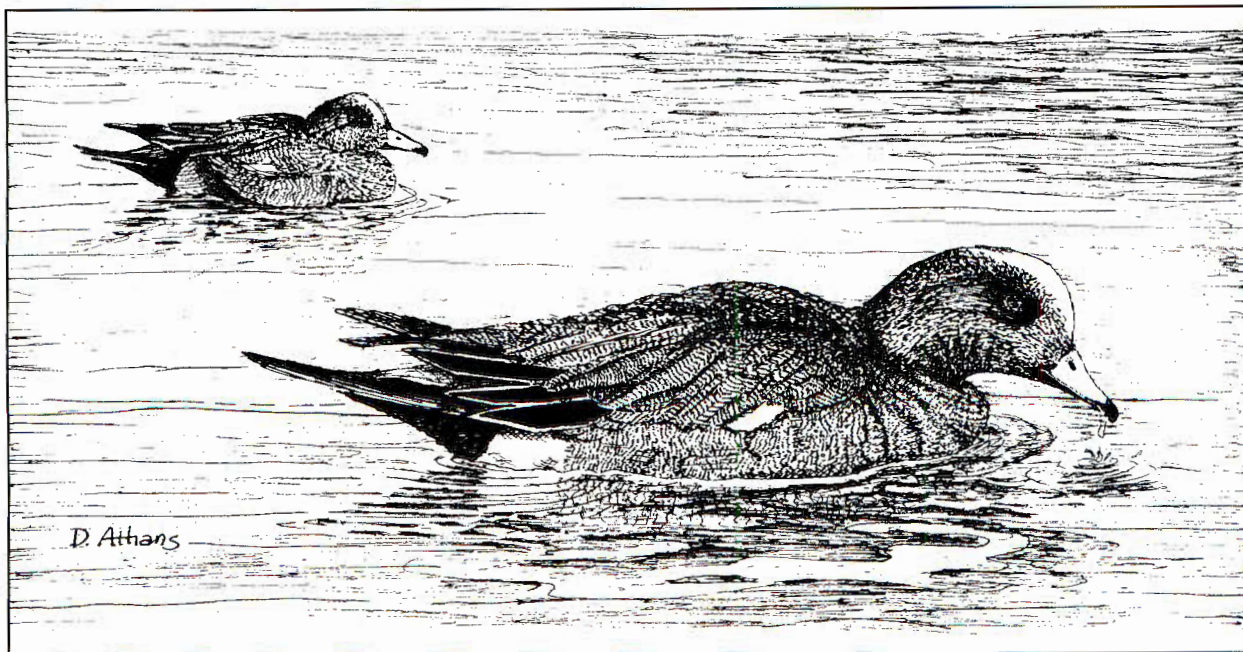
— 173 species both times — and we were convinced that the route we had settled on the previous year would finally yield a new state record.

Our first route had covered only Cook and Lake Counties. We had now expanded to six counties and over 400 miles. Each year we also spent more time in the field staking out birds, and on the phone, finding out from others what was around. Last year had been particularly frustrating. For the first time we had tried a route combining central Illinois, with its field and woodland breeders, with the sloughs and lakefront of the northern part of the state. A cold wind blew all night and all day keeping the birds almost completely silent. At 3 a.m., with only three species we had retreated to the Oak Ridge Truck Stop for pancakes and

eggs. Despite the nasty weather and our hour-long breakfast, we managed — with the help of eight species of gulls — to finish just two shy of the record. We knew that with a little better luck we could break 175.

But now it was past midnight, and there was no sign of the team member responsible for the whole southern half of our route.

A pair of headlights finally emerged at the end of the road, and soon Steve was leaping out of his car. He had been delayed at a family graduation party, but had made it from Danville, Illinois, as quickly as he could. Adrenalin and caffeine were now coursing through our veins as we headed off. The wind continued to gain speed. Stumbling in the darkness through the briars and un-



*The six-member Illinois Big Day Team broke the all-time record when it discovered an American Wigeon in northern Illinois. Drawing by David Athans.*