

Southern Illinois Team Garners 101 Species on Hot July Day

by Rhonda S. Monroe, alias Red-headed Chat

On 1997 July 21, I and my friends, Cathie Hutcheson and David Kvernes, set out at 4:15 a.m. from Cathie's country home near Makanda with a list of 187 species to locate, a copy of Doug Robinson's "Southern Illinois Birds," and our prearranged map of attack, beginning our first attempt at a summer big day.

Cathie had heard a Barred Owl on her property before David's and my arrival but nothing was vocalizing except insects as we loaded her van with supplies, equipment, and field guides. The sky was clear and the moon was full when we headed for Lake Mermet in southeastern Illinois. We hoped to get the Least Bittern and Common Moorhen known to be there. We veered through Giant City State Park/Makanda on our way south to listen for owls. The owls weren't talking.

Our first group bird was a Whip-poor-will followed by an early rising Northern Mockingbird singing at 4:30 a.m. just south of the park. Along the gravel roads on our way to Interstate 57, we heard a Dickcissel, cardinal, robin, American Goldfinch, and the first of dozens of Indigo Buntings we were to hear or see throughout the day. We detected a Wild Turkey "gobbling" in the distance near a farm but didn't count it even though, on closer inspection, the farm appeared poultry-free.

At Mermet, we were unsuccessful at adding the bittern and moorhen to our list. We all caught a glimpse of what appeared to be the moorhen as it dove for cover among the reeds but didn't get an adequate view to say for certain. Included in the list of species we did find at Mermet were Green Heron (one or more on nearly every dead snag!), Great Blue Heron, Canada Geese, Killdeer, Purple

Martin, Carolina Chickadee, Eastern Bluebird, Tufted Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatch, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Prothonotary Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, and Wood Duck. A very vocal Red-shouldered Hawk, a low soaring Osprey, and wild turkeys (2 handsome males 200 yards away from 2 hens with 8+ young) added three sometimes difficult finds to our list. Our day was off to a good start.

We headed back west, stopping at Cypress Creek National Wildlife Refuge specifically targeting a Henslow's Sparrow. The Henslow's alluded us but a Willow Flycatcher called from a tree top. It was nearly 9 a.m. and we were still missing some easy species as we headed southwest to Alexander County via Mounds City and Horseshoe Lake. At Mounds we picked up one of four Mississippi Kites seen that day.

We skirted the south side of Horseshoe Lake where we found Turkey Vultures, a Great Egret, and Northern Rough-winged Swallows. We passed on checking the Bald Eagle nest area at Horseshoe thinking we'd find an eagle along the Mississippi River levy and headed in that direction.

After a 90-minute trip through the baked farm fields of extreme southern Alexander County in search of early fall migrating shorebirds, Missouri crossovers, and access to the Mississippi, our best finds were Least Tern and Horned Lark. We headed north to Thebes for river access. At Thebes we found Barn Swallows and something we hadn't expected, a *Michelinus flatis* (flat tire). After changing the flat, we headed to East Cape Girardeau in search of mud flats. In a flooded field southeast of East Cape, we found the

"bird(s) of the day", beautiful Black-necked Stilts! At this location we also picked up Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs and Semipalmated and Least Sandpipers. As I remember, these shorebirds brought our list of species to near 87.

The fear of driving without a spare tire forced us off the birding trail and back to Cathie's for a change of vehicles. We made the switch about 1:45 p.m., ate a quick lunch, and while birding her yard, added Scarlet Tanager and Great Crested Flycatcher. We then headed back out on the road with Pine Hills, the Big Muddy Levy, Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge, and Rend Lake still to go.

On our way to Pine Hills, we stopped at Trail of Tears State Park. There we found Chipping Sparrow, Yellow-throated Warbler, Northern Parula, and Pine Warbler. A quick drive through Pine Hills campground netted us a Hairy Woodpecker.

Our next stop was at the enchanting seasonal mud flats along the Big Muddy levy at the intersections of Route 3 and the Big Muddy River. To our disappointment, the Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons that are often at the flats, naturally were not there this day. Present though was a needed Little Blue Heron. We decided to drive the Big Muddy levy from Route 3 to Grand Tower. On the levy we found a Loggerhead Shrike and Tree Swallows, two essential species. From Grand Tower we headed for Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge where we hoped to get some of the easy species we'd missed.

At Crab Orchard, we found a Ring-billed Gull and Prairie Warblers. We failed to locate a Blue Grosbeak