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Letter from the editor

Take the county big day challenge!

The early morning hours of May 17, 1996 were not a good omen. It stormed all night long. Lightning flashed in tandem with booming thunder. Three to four inches of rain fell swiftly and violently on Lake County. As I drove down Route 60 at 3:45 a.m. in Mundelein, half the stop lights weren't working, roads were flooded. There we sat in Denny's eating English muffins, waiting for the rain to subside: Renee Baade. Eric Walters. David Johnson. Sheryl De Vore. I called us the IOS REDS (Renee, Eric, Dave, Sheryl). We were going to do a Lake County Big Day.

We could have canoed, better yet, practiced our river rapid running skills when we arrived at our first stop - nearly an hour late because of the weather - at Wright Woods to call in a Barred Owl. It never called back. We arrived at Waukegan Beach a good hour and a half later than scheduled. It was so foggy along the shoreline, we wondered if we would see anything. But it was warm, warmer than it had been for weeks. And promise floated along with the southerly winds.

Maybe it was just luck or maybe it was a reward when Renee, with help from Dave and Eric, pried a fishing lure out of the mouth of a Ring-billed Gull she had seen flailing on the beach - and probably saved its life. But after that, miracles began to happen. A Pectoral Sandpiper flew by. Six Sanderlings scurried on the shoreline. Twelve Ruddy Turnstones displayed their glorious breeding plumage. A Black Tern flew out of the fog, landed on a perch while we all focused our binoculars on it, then promptly flew back into the fog as we all shouted, "Got it!"

A Ruby-throated Hummingbird zipped by while we were at a stop light. I missed that one, but we got three more later on. A Chimney Swift practically flew into Renee's car. A long, grueling hike at Illinois Beach State Park produced Grasshopper Sparrow. Western Meadowlark. Pine Warbler. And a male and female Brewer's Blackbird. Singing. By 3 p.m., we had recorded 127 species. Then Eric told us: Hey guys, we might break the record. What record? The biggest record ever set in a county. This was my first big day - and all I wanted to do was get through it - and we had the chance to break a record! Eric said he thought the highest county Big Day on record was 155 species.

We were pumped. We drove over to the Des Plaines Wetlands Demonstration Project to pick up a few shorebirds. More than a few. Stilt Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, Short-billed Dowitcher, Semi-palmated Sandpiper. Another White-rumped Sandpiper. We added 12 new species of shorebirds at those mudflats. 6 p.m. 149 species counted. And we still hadn't done much land birding. At 7 p.m., we stopped at Ryerson Woods, where the flooding had completely obliterated some of the paths. We sloshed through several new warblers, a Great Crested Flycatcher, and an Olive-sided Flycatcher as a Wood Thrush serenaded us. 154 species. To break the record, we needed two more species. So we headed up to Route 173 and Sheridan Road along the lake at 8:15 p.m. The weatherman had threatened rain for the evening. The wind speed was increasing. And we wondered: would the woodcocks be

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