

## PICK UP YOUR BINOCULARS AND RUN!

by Wayne R. Petersen

Recently, birding guru Pete Dunne (i.e., of Cape May fame) wrote a short piece for *WildBird* magazine (May 1995) on the techniques of "bird-a-thoning." Pete's ever colorful coupling of words included an apt description of a bird-a-thon as "the fiscal hybrid of one of birding's most cherished institutions" — the "Big Day."

For most readers the idea of birding for the purpose of raising money for conservation probably is not a difficult concept to accept. However, the reality of asking people for fiscal sponsorship, regardless of the worthiness of the cause, is not the average birder's idea of how to have a good time. There can be little doubt that the increasing number of evening phone calls, requests by mail, and in-your-face solicitations that most of us receive these days do little to improve our attitude toward such activities. But there is another side to bird-a-thoning—the birding side.

My interest and involvement in the subject includes the fact that I have been passionately involved with birds and birding for forty years; have participated in more Big Days, Century Runs, and what have you than I care to recall; have been privileged to be a member of a winning bird-a-thon team in New Jersey Audubon's World Series of Birding; have willingly joined in raising large amounts of money for several well-known and prestigious conservation organizations; have coordinated the Massachusetts Audubon Society's Bird-a-thon for the past five years; and have had more fun and seen more birds in the process of all this than I would ever have thought possible. It is the last point that is the real focus of this commentary.

My intent is not to promote bird-a-thoning per se, but rather to underscore some birding realities, specifically here in Massachusetts—the turf with which I am personally most familiar. To do this, I invite the reader to consider a few statistics that have emerged from the Massachusetts Audubon Society's (MAS) Annual Bird-a-thon during the period 1990-1994. These figures may be particularly useful for new birders who are less familiar with the Bay State's birding possibilities, as well as for more seasoned experts who may be challenged to find creative ways to use the numbers in guiding their future spring birding efforts.

The comments that follow specifically pertain only to single 24-hour periods during the middle two weeks in May. Twenty-four hours is the time allowed for doing the annual MAS Bird-a-thon, as well as for all Big Day events that are officially registered with the American Birding Association—the birding community's answer to the National Olympic Committee. The primary difference between the MAS event and most Big Days, however, is the MAS

Bird-a-thon is held from 6:00 PM to 6:00 PM instead of from midnight to midnight.

The following numbers have been compiled from the MAS Bird-a-thon during the five-year period of 1990-1994:

- the cumulative species total has ranged from 236 to 259 species
- the average cumulative species total is 244 species
- the grand total of bird species recorded is 274
- among the most unusual species recorded are Little Egret, Black-tailed Godwit, and Fork-tailed Flycatcher, along with lesser rarities such as Sandhill Crane, Yellow-throated Warbler, Prothonotary Warbler, and Summer Tanager.

Most Massachusetts birders may agree that these totals represent some impressive statewide birding statistics. Indeed, I wish I had seen all the birds compiled during that period! More amazing, however, is the fact that these statistics were compiled in only five 24-hour periods. In just five days, the Bird-a-thon has recorded ninety percent of the 304 species listed as regularly occurring on the MAS Yearly Checklist of Massachusetts Birds. To put these numbers in greater perspective, recall that the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee's (MARC) version of the state bird list stands at approximately 450 species. MAS Bird-a-thoners have recorded nearly sixty-one percent of the bird species on the state list. By any standards, these percentages are impressive.

What, if any, are the practical applications of all these totals and percentages? In terms of science, probably none. But from the standpoint of a person interested in seeing lots of birds, especially lots of birds in a short timespan, the possibilities are considerable. Not coincidentally, the MAS Bird-a-thon is conducted on the Friday and Saturday closest to the third weekend in May, which is generally the peak weekend for spring migration in Massachusetts. Think of the possibilities: eleven species of long-legged waders; twenty-seven species of waterfowl; twenty species of shorebirds; eight species of owls; seven species of thrushes; thirty-four species of warblers; and fourteen species of sparrows. These are actual numbers generated by dedicated Bird-a-thoners during the past five years, although not by single parties of observers.

The MAS Bird-a-thon is predicated on both cooperation and competition. On the one hand, each MAS sanctuary is permitted to field an "official" birding team that may not exceed fifty birders, although there is no limit to the number of people who may get sponsors and go birding on their own for the Bird-a-thon. The members of each "official" sanctuary team may cover the state in parties of two or more and in any way they like, as long as all Bird-a-thon guidelines are adhered to: the cumulative total of their efforts represents the sanctuary's final species total. At the other extreme, each sanctuary competes with all other sanctuaries to record the greatest number of bird species, along with trying to raise as much money as possible. Because the Bird-a-thon is driven by (often

intense!) competition, the final lists are carefully scrutinized. The end result is a compilation that is as accurate as it can be.

Many hard-core birders agree that participating in a well-orchestrated and successful Big Day can be among the high points of a birding year. For example, much of the success of a highly publicized bird-a-thon event like New Jersey's World Series of Birding is driven by the desire of birding zealots to eclipse previous Big Day birding records in New Jersey. Even though the format of the MAS event does not permit MAS Bird-a-thon results to be applied to official Big Day rules, the premise and potential are still the same.

The American Birding Association's published high count for a Massachusetts Big Day record is 161 species. However, in 1975, an especially resourceful birding team managed to locate 175 species in Essex County. Their tally is unofficial because not all ABA Big Day rules and guidelines were met. But that is not the point. A look at the MAS Bird-a-thon stat sheet for the last five years suggests that it is possible to see many more bird species in Massachusetts in a day than 175! So, why doesn't some enterprising team of hot-shot birders use these Bird-a-thon data to devise a route and a schedule that will exceed all previous and venerable Massachusetts Big Day records? Here is a chance to bestow upon the venerable Bay State yet another birding accolade! All it takes is for someone to pick up the binoculars and run with them.

**UPDATE:** As an update to this article, the 1995 MAS Bird-a-thon eclipsed all previous records. This year the Blue Hills Trailside Museum winning team collectively recorded 236 species, and the statewide total generated by all team lists was 253 species. These numbers further underscore the potential for recording an impressive number of different species in Massachusetts in a single 24-hour period.

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