

MY OHIO BIG YEARS

by Dan Sanders

Introduction and Strategies

I have been doing Ohio Big Years now for 19 consecutive years, since my retirement in June of 1994. I didn't start out 1995 intending to do one, but after completing the daily checklist on our return from a March day of birding at Lake Erie, my birding friend Don Burton suggested that we should try to tally 250 or more species by the end of the year. We found our 250th bird on December 31st of that year, a Fox Sparrow in the Cincinnati area. For 1996, we decided to 'up the ante', and it would seem that I had become 'hooked' on Ohio Big Year birding! Since then, some years have been 'bigger' than others, but I've always started each year with the goal of finding as many Ohio birds as possible.

Since 1995, my annual totals have never been less than 262 species (which I achieved during my ABA Big Year of 2005), but reaching 300 species in a single year had eluded me until 2009 when I was able to record 301 species. Numbers since then had been 298 species in 2010 and 312 species in 2011 – just two species short of the Ohio record set by John Pogacnik back in 1990. Would it be possible in 2012 to top last year's total of 312 species? Only time would tell.

The 2012 Ohio Big Year started out just as they had for many years, by helping out with the Kingston Christmas Bird Count (CBC), which is most always held on January 1st. For me, this has been a great way to start out each new year since all birds seen become FOY (first of year) sightings. Some highlights for the section that our CBC team discovered this year included a Ring-necked Duck, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, and White-crowned Sparrow. On the return trip to Columbus, we made a stop at Green Lawn Cemetery for an over-wintering Merlin (reported there earlier), and also for good looks at several Black-crowned Night Herons that were spending the winter along the banks of the Olentangy River near the OSU Stadium. All in all, it was a pretty good first day for another Ohio Big Year.

Another good way to begin a Big Year is to participate in a *Big January*, with the goal of identifying as many species as possible by the end of this first month. Each year, an increasing number of Ohio birders have set a goal of reaching 100 species or more during this time period and, if

successful, they become official members of the Ohio "Century Club". This friendly competition has become more popular in recent years and is a very good way to begin any new year. In 2003, Greg Miller and I teamed up to challenge Rob and Sandy Harlan's January record of 123 species. You can find a summary of this exciting month on Greg's website, but we both surpassed this record with Greg tallying 130 species and I with 132 for that January. Since then, the bar was raised by Ryan Steiner who recorded 137 January species in 2007, and most recently by Dan Gesualdo who tallied 151 species in January of 2012!

Still another good Big Year or Big January strategy is to add species that may still be present from December of the previous year. This is especially true for Ohio rarities. An important January carry-over species from 2011 was a Black-tailed Gull, first discovered by Craig Holt at Ashtabula Harbor on November 16th. The sighting was a first Ohio record, and was seen by many listers from Ohio and beyond! Fortunately, this bird lingered in the area for several more weeks and was seen again in early January by me and others for our 2012 Ohio lists. Other species that sometimes carry over into the next year include Red and White-winged crossbills, Common Redpoll, Pine Siskin, Bohemian Waxwing, and other scarce Ohio species such as Rufous Hummingbird and Purple Sandpiper (sometimes the first, but more often the very last shorebird species for the year!).

January and February are also very good months for finding many of the gull species. During the coldest weather, when large areas of Lake Erie are frozen, these gulls are much easier to find as they become more concentrated in open-water areas during their search for food. These locations are usually the warm-water outlets of power plants along the lakefront. During the winter of 2011-2012, a few Ohio birders were able to find most of the 13 Ohio core-list gull species. Most of these sightings were along the South shore of Lake Erie between Sandusky and Conneaut.

Summary of Winter Season Sightings (January 1 through March 21)

The total number of species seen during this season (127) was somewhat low compared to previous years, but this season is normally the "slow-

est” one. So after a decent January, February is a good month to plan some out of state birding trips! For me, the trips were to Arizona and California in pursuit of several ABA-area life birds! And so with only 25 days of Ohio birding, here are the winter season highlights:

Core list species: Greater White-fronted Goose, Snow Goose, Ross’s Goose, Cackling Goose, Surf Scoter, White-winged Scoter, Black Scoter, Long-tailed Duck, Red-necked Grebe, Eared Grebe, Merlin, Peregrine Falcon, Sandhill Crane, Thayer’s Gull, Iceland Gull, Glaucous Gull, Barn Owl, Snowy Owl, Long-eared Owl, Northern Shrike, White-winged Crossbill, and Pine Siskin.

Review list species (review species are birds on the official Ohio list that have been documented at least one time, but that have an average of no more than two documented sightings per year over the past 10 years): Black-tailed Gull (new Ohio record), Common Raven, and Spotted Towhee.

The Spring Season (March 22 through June 21)

Spring is my favorite season for birding! Who among us does not anticipate hearing the first “Poor Sam Peabody, Peabody, Peabody” song of the White-throated Sparrow? Or seeing the swelling and opening of leaf and flower buds, or hearing the first spring peeper frogs? And being able to witness/experience the spring migration of our Ohio birds is foremost in our minds as we head out to our favorite birding hot spots. We can even go south to meet them, and then follow them as they move northward, clear to the south shore of Lake Erie where some may be temporarily “stopped” for our continued enjoyment before they strike out across the lake to their breeding grounds. Certainly birding is much more than just checking off the names of the birds we all love to see and hear! But keeping track of all the species we see each year is important as well, for personal and for scientific reasons. The highlights of my spring sightings (a total of 146 species) are:

Core list species: Ruffed Grouse, Red-throated Loon, American White Pelican, American Bittern, Least Bittern, Cattle Egret, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Willet, Upland Sandpiper, White-rumped Sandpiper, Stilt Sandpiper, Red-necked Phalarope, Black Tern, Chuck-will’s-widow, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Alder Flycatcher, Bell’s Vireo, Golden-winged Warbler, Connecticut Warbler, Mourning Warbler, Clay-colored Sparrow, Lark Sparrow, Blue Grosbeak, Western Meadowlark, Yellow-headed Blackbird, and Purple Finch.

Review list species: Pacific Loon, Tri-colored Heron, Glossy Ibis, White-faced Ibis, Piping Plover, Black-necked Stilt, Least Tern, Royal Tern, Eurasian Collared Dove, White-winged Dove, Say’s Phoebe, Fish Crow (a new Ohio record), Kirtland’s Warbler, and Golden-crowned Sparrow.

The Summer Season (June 22 through August 21)

Most new birders would guess that this time period, host for our breeding birds, would not result in the addition of very many new species for a year list, and this is pretty much the case. But there are at least two main reasons for remaining vigilant during this time period. The first and most important one is that from mid-July through the end of this season is when the shorebird migration is getting into full swing, and some of these shorebird species don’t even move through Ohio during the spring migration. The second reason is that this is a time of year for what is referred to as post-breeding dispersal; when (usually) young birds from surrounding states may be aimlessly “wandering about” and end up here in Ohio. And so this is an important season for adding some of the harder-to-find species to your year list. The highlights of the 14 summer additions are:

Core list species: Henslow’s Sparrow, Little Blue Heron, American Avocet, Whimbrel, Hudsonian Godwit, Marbled Godwit, Red Knot, Western Sandpiper, Baird’s Sandpiper, and Sedge Wren.

Review list species: Black-bellied Whistling-duck, Brown Pelican, Mississippi Kite, and Snowy Plover.

The Fall Season to Year’s End (August 22 through December 21)

For adding significant numbers to your year list, the fall migration is just as important as the spring migration, but takes place over a longer period of time. These birds aren’t in as big a hurry to get to their wintering areas as they were to get to the breeding grounds! This may mean that you will have to spend more time in the field to find some of the birds that you may have missed earlier, or those that don’t even move through Ohio during the spring migration. Still other factors may make fall birding more difficult... many of the adult birds have already changed to their basic/winter plumage before arriving here. This makes them more difficult to positively identify. Also, many of these migrants are juvenile birds

with plumages that are quite unlike those of their parents. Another important missing part is that most of these birds are no longer singing, so identifying them by song may be impossible. And so the fall season can be a very challenging one for finding and identifying birds. Of course, some over-wintering species will also begin arriving here by the end of this season. Unfortunately, I added no new birds to my year list during the last nine days of December. The highlights of my fall sightings (a total of 33 species) are:

Core list species: Brant, Golden Eagle, Purple Sandpiper, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Long-billed Dowitcher, Wilson's Phalarope, Red Phalarope, Franklin's Gull, Little Gull, Sabine's Gull, Pomarine Jaeger, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Rufous Hummingbird, Le Conte's Sparrow, Nelson's Sparrow, Red Crossbill, Common Redpoll, and Evening Grosbeak.

Review list species: King Eider, Western Grebe, Prairie Falcon, Black-headed Gull, California Gull, Parasitic Jaeger, Western Kingbird, Varied Thrush, Bohemian Waxwing, Lark Bunting, Harris's Sparrow, and Hoary Redpoll.

Ohio 2012 Big Year Summary

My 2012 Ohio Big Year turned out to be a banner year; I recorded 320 species of birds for a new personal and Ohio record! I was able to find all but seven of the 294 regularly-occurring (core list) Ohio species, my best results for this group between the years of 1995 and 2011. But the biggest difference, for both 2011 and 2012, was in the category of Ohio review list species that were seen and reported by Ohio birders. Up until 2011, the greatest number of review list species I had seen during any of my previous Ohio big years was 17. In 2012, this number in this category jumped to 33 species! And there were several others reported that I did not find. So this was an extraordinary year for finding review-list birds in Ohio; rarities are the biggest single factor for any record-setting year, and something that you can never predict in advance. Why so many review-list species were found this year in Ohio is unknown, but it is most likely related to suitable habitat and the availability of food in their normal range, and/or to regional weather conditions such as extremes of temperature, droughts, hurricanes, and so forth.

Still another most important factor that has contributed to my more recent Ohio listing successes is the ever-increasing number of birders,

with many of them joining the "listing game" at some level. Coupled with this increased interest in birding as a skilled outdoor pursuit is the popularity and use of smart phones and other communication options. This would include eBird postings and the increasingly popular Facebook groups! The ability to call or text other birders from the field, to post to and receive messages from list-serves while in the field, and even to send and receive pictures from the field has made it possible for birders to get to these locations while the reported rarities are still present. And I would point out that 2012 was a most successful year not just for me but for many other Ohio birders as well (see the related article in *The Cerulean*, Winter 2013, Vol.9, No. 1).

I have been asked if this Ohio Big Year record will ever be broken, and my usual response is that "Records are made to be broken". I will guess that this will happen sooner or later, but I will feel very good about having once held the record! I would also add that there are several major factors to consider in this pursuit. The first is that it requires a commitment of time for pursuing birds during all seasons of the year and in a timely manner; especially for Ohio rarities! The second is a commitment to vigilance. This would include using several of the e-communication options that are available to you, both at home and also while "on the road". But the most important aspect of this pursuit is your willingness to share your sightings with all others who may benefit from this timely information! The creation of a statewide network of birding friends will become the single most important asset to your success!

One final note... The authenticity of any final number that is submitted by a birder, especially if it involves a record, is based on the honor system, and it is most important that this number be accompanied by a complete list of birds seen, along with the date and location of the first sighting. Of course, any listed sighting is more believable when other experienced birders are present at the time of your sighting. And so, for "record" achievements, it is always best if the number of "single observer" sightings is very low. This is especially true for any rare/review-list species that you may have included on your list. Though single-observer sightings may sometimes be unavoidable, this is usually not a problem because when a rare bird is found and reported, there are many other birders present, even before you arrive at this location. I am happy to report that for my 2012 Ohio Big Year list, all of the species in-

cluded here were seen and confirmed by at least one other experienced birder. (I will be happy to send a copy of my list to anyone who requests it.)

Acknowledgements... As I have mentioned above, the most important aspect of a successful year of Ohio birding is the help that you receive from other birders, and this year was no exception. First and foremost, I owe my deepest gratitude to Doreene Linzell with whom I share this state record. Without her help in finding and identifying birds, checking list-serves, navigating, and posting/e-mailing/texting, plus Facebook and cell phone communications, we could never have achieved this result! Thanks also to our many birding friends from around the state (you know who you are), for helping us find our “target birds” during this exceptional year!

Dan became very interested in birds at the early age of six years. Two species, a cooing Mourning Dove (identified by his mother), and a nest of American Robins (shown to him by his grandfather), were his “spar” birds. Through his elementary and high school years, the Birds of North America (Golden Guide), and the Peterson Field Guide were his mentors for field identification. As a biology major at OSU, his special interest in birds was influenced and encouraged by Dr. Robert Reese and other OSU teaching associates. During Dan’s professional teaching career, his birding ventures were centered around Spring break, the Fall migration, and several family vacations to other states. But after retiring in 1994, and a challenge to identify 250 or more Ohio species in 1995, the “listing game” became a focal point for his retirement years. Since then, several intermediate and long-term Ohio and ABA-area goals have been set, and as of this date Dan has met or surpassed all of his goals, except for one. They are: Ohio “life-time” goal: 300 species - This was achieved by the end of 1996, and he is currently at 363 Ohio “life” species. Ohio “Big Year” goal: 300 species - This wasn’t achieved until 2010, with a total of 301 species, but a new Ohio Big Year record of 320 species was set in 2012. ABA-area “Big Year” goal: 700 species - Dan’s 2005 ABA Big Year total was 715 species; he was the fifth person to ever reach 700 or more ABA species in a single year. ABA-area “lower 48” goal of 750 species - Dan’s total is currently at 766 species. ABA-area “life-time” goal: 800 species - Dan saw his 800th ABA species in May of 2010, a Bahama Mockingbird at Fort DeSoto CP, Florida. His current ABA total is 816 species. As a result of his ABA-area efforts, Dan inadvertently established an ABA New Millennium record and is currently ranked #1, having recorded 800 ABA-area bird species since January 1, 2001! And what about the goal he has not yet reached? Well, here it is: to average 290 or more Ohio species for 20 consecutive years. And after 19 consecutive Ohio Big

Years, Dan is currently ‘on track’ for reaching this goal. Only time will tell, but I’m guessing that he’ll reach this one as well! And does Dan have any regrets? The answer: Only one... that he didn’t start listing 30 years ago!