

## Ohio Big Year

Chuck Hocevar

My birdwatching in recent years has been sporadic. In 1978 I had a good year when I observed 263 species without a plan and with very little knowledge of the state. 1979 and 1980 were good birdwatching years, but because of work responsibilities, I could not give consideration to a big Ohio effort.

At the end of 1980 everything fell into place. My work demands had lessened, my son had spawned a real interest in birdwatching, and most important my wife encouraged such an effort.

With this background, I found myself with Jim Fry and a hardy bunch of birdwatchers at Greenlawn Cemetery on January 1. My goal had been predetermined and was to simply see as many birds in one year in the State of Ohio as I could. My commitment was not to set records, but to do my best. Little did I comprehend what a rewarding project this would be. It greatly sharpened my skills, increased my knowledge of the birdlife of Ohio, gave me an opportunity to spend more time with the more active birders, and very importantly was a family project that Pat and Tim shared.

One result of this experience was a respect for Jim Fry's efforts in recent years. Jim has now seen 266 species in Ohio for the past five years and set in 1978 a standard of 283 species which was universally accepted as the state record. Bruce Peterjohn does not actively participate in such endeavors, but was reliably reported to have observed 285 species in 1980.

Don Roberson wrote a book in 1978, "Birders California." This is an excellent account of Don's effort to build a California year list. In his book he stated that there are three ways to achieve a high year list. The first way is to have unlimited time (even with little money) to bird most days and most areas. The second is to live in the most productive area in the state (in Ohio, preferably along Lake Erie) and bird every weekend, covering the lake area thoroughly and making selected trips elsewhere. The third alternative is to carefully plan all available time to coincide the most productive areas with the species needed. This was the choice I made because of my responsibilities to my job and family. The main reason that I was able to do a big year was that Pat and Tim shared in the experience and had fun with me. Tim alone saw 248 species which was a great learning experience for a ten year old. Pat saw a lot of birds, but somehow always ended up in some of the nicest accommodations and restaurants in the state. In summary, if your spouse is not understanding, stamp collecting might be more appropriate than a Big Year in Ohio.

It certainly has become unfashionable in recent years to be a "lister." Many people stick out their chest and triumphantly say, "I don't know how many birds I've seen." Most intolerance comes from very inactive birders or those that are concerned that someone will interpret listing to be their principal motive for birding. Listing is not anywhere close to being my prime motivation, but if it was, who should care? Listing is simply a tangible record of one's experiences. (Besides, I've never stepped on a Black Rail.)

I would not recommend that most birders attempt a big year. Most do not have the temperament, the endurance, or desire. In 1981 I drove over 30,000 miles on birding trips. I visited 72 counties, spent over \$2,500.00 on gasoline, and spent every available day (except four) in the field, and I drove to Lake Erie no less than 47 times.



For those of you that have an interest, I will relate to you my experiences of 1981 and my plan.

### The Plan

Ohio does not have the diversity of habitat of many states. There are no mountains, deserts, or oceans, and it is not strategically located to attract great numbers of western species. What Ohio does have is Lake Erie, interesting winter vagrants, and a few isolated populations of breeding southern and mid-western birds. Consequently, I would suggest the following plan:

#### Winter (January-February)

I spend a weekend just getting all of the ordinary birds out of the way. Get over 100 species during the first two months and you'll be one-third of the way toward your year totals. My philosophy during 1981 was to find the tough species and let the easier species come in their own good time. For example, I could go to southern Ohio in January and find kinglets, phoebes, etc., but chose to go to Lake Erie to find rare gulls and waterfowl.

The principal efforts during this season were centered around finding key waterfowl: oldsquaw, scoters, red-necked grebe; rare gulls: lesser black-backed, iceland, kittiwake, Thayers; and owls: snowy, short-eared, screech, and long-eared. This season is also the principal time to look for crossbills, grosbeaks, siskins, redpolls, house finch, and longspurs. A second worthwhile area is Zaleski State Forest (Vinton County) or Tar Hollow State Park (Ross County) to find turkey, grouse, pileated woodpecker, and other woodland species.

#### Spring (March-May)

There are so many species to pick up during this season that it is almost impossible to name them all. The birding is so fast and frantic that you should wake up Memorial Day and be at least in the 250-270 range.

Waterfowl to be looked for early in the spring include snow goose, white-fronted goose, Eurasian wigeon, and red-necked grebe. Key marsh birds include little blue, Louisiana, and yellow-crowned night herons; cattle and snowy egrets; ibis; bitterns, sandhill crane; rails; and cormorant. The key spring owls are long-eared and saw-whet, both of which can be found in proper habitat and time. Birds of prey that require a little extra effort include merlin and osprey.

May brings a deluge of land birds. Those that I look for a little more diligently include alder flycatcher, olive-sided flycatcher; loggerhead shrike; orange-crowned, golden-winged, connecticut, and mourning warblers; western meadowlark; lark sparrow; and brewer's blackbird. March is still a good time to find a turkey.

#### Summer (June-August)

Summer serves three main purposes: First, it's a good time to clean up any springtime misses like southern warblers (worm-eating, yellow-throated, pine, prairie, kentucky, or Louisiana waterthrush.) Other cleanup species could include black vulture, Henslow's sparrow, or loggerhead shrike.

The second purpose I pursued during the summer period was the most fun. That was finding the marginal nesting birds like dickcissel, blue grosbeak, Bachman's sparrow, Bewick's wren, yellow-headed blackbird, Chuck-wills-widow, western meadowlark, Bell's vireo, sedge wren, barn owl, and lark sparrow. Some were tough to come by; several I missed.

The third part of my summer effort was by far the most productive: the shorebird migration. Principal species to work for during this period include willet, Baird's sandpiper, piping plover, hudsonian and marbled godwit, whimbrel, phalaropes, red knot, and western sandpiper. Some shorebirds like long-billed dowitcher, buff-breasted sandpiper, red phalarope, and whimbrel are easier in the fall.

### Fall (September-November)

This was the season that was the most fun for me. It was a time for boat trips into Lake Erie and to chase individual birds. This season brings sharp-tailed and LeConte's sparrows (the second I missed). Fall also brings Franklin's, little gull, and rarely a Sabine's. This is really the season of jaegers, gannets, scoters, brant, and peregrines. It is also the time to find a red-throated loon.

Fall is the period that having a network of birding pays the most dividends. My principal contacts during the year included Tom LePage, Howard Besser, and Bill and Nancy Klamm in Cleveland; John Pogacnik at Crane Creek; Tom Kemp in Toledo; Jim Fry, Bruce Peterjohn, and Jerry Cairo in Columbus. Also of considerable help were the Toledo and Cleveland Rare Bird Alerts.

I ended the year at 292. The number is no big deal. The effort, the pleasure, the companionship, the learning experience were unmatched. I believe anyone with the motivation and unlimited time could reach 310+ in a good year. 1981 was not a good year for accidentals, but is also was not terrible. The highlights of marginal species included varied thrush, black-necked stilt, Louisiana heron, ibis, groove-billed ani, Eurasian wigeon, king eider, eared grebe, sandhill crane, parasitic jaeger, least tern, and mew gull.

### The Year: 1981

Unlike Don Roberson, in 1977, I fully intended to do a big year in 1981. When I started, I had no vision of passing the state standards that I accepted. I had made some effort in 1978 to get to 263 species that year and knew that 270 to 275 was a reasonable target. By June I realized that I could get to the mid 280's if I was lucky, but it wasn't until late October that I was sure that 290 to 300 was possible. My monthly totals were:

	<u>YTD</u>	<u># IN MONTH</u>
January	93	93
February	101	75
March	123	101
April	189	156
May	255	216
June	259	123
July	267	121
August	274	104
September	276	113
October	282	129
November	288	96
December	292	79

Throughout the year I made every effort to bird with other birders. This was one aspect of the year that was fun and very rewarding.

I spent January 1 with Jim Fry, Jerry Cairo, Mike Givens, Marge Baughman, Nancy Law, Buggie Markham, Gina Buckey. After finding a screech owl and great horned owl at Greenlawn Cemetery, we headed to Springfield to see the harlequin duck that had decided to spend its winter vacation there. By the end of the day, I had tallied 28 species and the adventure had begun. Only 364 more days.

On the 2nd and 3rd I went up to Cleveland and birded with Tom LePage and covered Eastlake, Holden Arboretum, Castalia, and the power plants from Eastlake to Lorain. We found another harlequin duck at Eastlake along with a glaucous gull. A snowy owl was found at 55th Street. At the end of the first long weekend in January, I was up to 66.

On the 10th of January, I went to Clear Creek with Jerry Cairo and on the 17th went back to Cleveland to get the varied thrush (HB, BNK, TL) in Parma. Jerry and I again got out and birded Dayton, Adams County, and Shawnee State Forest on the 24th and went to Toledo and Lorain on the 31st. The best birds included three mute swans in the Cleveland-Lorain area on the 16th and three more at Bay-shore on the 31st. Two greater white-fronted geese were cornered at Ottawa NWR on the 18th. Jerry and I located three short-eared owls near Lancaster on the 10th (an excellent spot) and four long-eared owls near Trotwood (Dayton) on the 24th. White winged crossbills were waiting for us at Woodlawn Cemetery on the 31st and my first Ohio Thater's Gull was found for me by Ray Hannikman at Lorain on the 17th.

February was not a highly productive month. I chased red crossbills at several locations and a Brewer's blackbird at Blacklick Metro Park--all unsuccessfully. There were some successes in finding oldsquaw, black vulture, and iceland gull. I ended the month on the 28th by finding a saw-whet owl at Crane Creek which was subsequently seen by many observers.

Spring finally sprung in March and I had a good month in which I traveled over all of the state. A red-necked grebe was found by son Tim at Rocky Fork State Park on March 21st. John Pogacnik clued me in to the Eurasian wigeon\* at Ottawa NWR which I saw on March 7th and again on the 14th. Jim Tucker, President of the American Birding Association, visited with my family the weekend of the 14th in one of his two trips to Ohio in 1981. (I have strong feelings about the value of and the service provided by the American Birding Association, much of which is unduplicated by any other organization or periodical. Jim's efforts to coordinate America's birdwatchers over the past 15 years has had its rewards and frustrations, but certainly deserves our support.) Back to birds!

I found my first merlin\* at Port Columbus Airport on the 6th which stayed around long enough to be found the next day by Jerry Cairo. The other highlights for March included a loggerhead shrike in Adams County and a group of ten turkeys at Tar Hollow.

April brought many species, the most noteworthy being a Brewer's blackbird\* at Crane Creek on the 18th and a Louisiana heron\* at Pickerington Marsh on the 29th. Both birds were found with Jerry Cairo and seen by many others. One of the most interesting sidelights of the year, however, was that the Louisiana heron traveled with an adult little blue heron. The nesting yellow-crowned night heron in Upper Arlington returned on April 25th to set up shop. Other observations of note were several cormorant sightings, several ospreys, another merlin, an American bittern at Sawmill on the 18th (only two 1981 observations) and the barred owls again nesting at Darby Metro Park. Bruce Peterjohn, Jerry Cairo, Howard



Besser, and I visited Tar Hollow State Park on the 24th and found many early migrants.

May, of course, is the month that you discover there are more than 20 birdwatchers in Ohio. As a matter of fact Greenlawn Cemetery, Crane Creek State Park, and Shaker Lakes probably sport several thousand. But have no fear, they will be gone by the 20th of the month and Karl Bednarik's bird path will soon give way to lovers and bathers. John Pagacnik flattered me by informing me in June that I was the only birder he had seen in weeks.

Jerry Cairo, Howard Besser, Dave Corbin, and I did a Big Day on May 16th and came up with 167 species. May highlights included an eared grebe\* at a pond on Blacklick Golf Course on the 19th, a sandhill crane at Ottawa NWR on the 9th and 10th. Blue grosbeak and Chuck-wills-widow were found in Adams County on several dates along with all the other southern Ohio goodies. The best location in "81" for sedge wrens was Carlisle Park near Oberlin. The month brought several observations of little blue herons, Wilson's phalaropes, both bitterns, lark sparrow, and 36 warbler species. Shorebirds included unusual spring sightings of western sandpiper, long-billed dowitcher, white-rumped sandpiper, and marbled godwit. (I saw all four of these species again in the "fall"). My biggest miss during spring migration was golden plover which was not recorded until mid-September.

June was fairly quiet. Several unsuccessful trips were made to Cedar Point NWR to try to find yellow-headed blackbirds. I chased other people's observations of this bird for several months before Bruce Peterjohn and I finally found it near the parking area at Crane Creek on July 27th. June birds included bell's vireo at Irwin Prairie, king rail at Ottawa, and nesting barn owls at Killbuck State WA.

July was an interesting month and brought me my best bird of the year: a black-necked stilt\*\* at Crane Creek on July 18th. This observation was documented and photographed, but by all means was the best bird I personally found in several years. Snowy egrets and avocets abounded this summer whereas I had only one observation of a willet at Huron on July 27th. Other good observations included an adult laughing gull\* at Gordon Park (JH) and hudsonian godwits (BP) at Ottawa.

After six weeks of trying to find dickcissels, we were finally fortunate enough to find a singing male in Butler County south of Darrrtown on the 4th of July (BP, JC).

August brought more snowy egrets and avocets, but also a piping plover at Bayshore on the 7th (LVC) and one at Huron on the 30th. Marbled godwits stayed at Ottawa, whimbrels at Burke Airport, (HB, TL), northern phalaropes at the Gordon Park landfill (HB, TL) and a knot at Huron. Buff-breasted sandpipers stayed for a few days at Burke (HB, TL) and my first Baird's sandpiper for 1981 was found at Crane Creek. (BP, DT, JC) The best bird of the month, however, was the least tern\* that was kind enough to spend a few days at Gordon Park. (HB, TL, EP) My birding in August was assisted when Pat, Timmy, and I rented a cottage on the lake in Huron. It was an excellent time to be at the lake, especially close to the Huron landfill.

September was my meager month for new birds which included only two species; namely, sharp-tailed sparrow (TL, RW) and golden plover. This paucity of new birds wasn't a reflection of how much time I spent in the field--it was simply an indication of how well I'd covered the migration and how few species were left. By the end of September I was at 276 and wondering if I'd ever see anything else.

October made up for September. It brought loons, cormorants, old-squaws, scoters, a peregrine falcon\*\*, another sharp-tailed sparrow, and a wayward groove-billed ani\* in the Cincinnati area. (BP, JC, DT) The Gordon Park landfill was outstanding and always had a treat or two.

October also included my first attempt at organizing a boat trip into Lake Erie. We were rained out of a trip on the 18th with gale force winds and all wished we'd been rained out on November 7th when we went out for several hours & turned green. We did, however, get out October 31st on a trip few will forget. In late morning of this date, our skipper ran us aground on rocks northeast of Middle Bass Island. Other than tearing a hole in the bottom of the boat, having to be hauled back to Port Clinton by the Coast Guard, almost sinking and having to be constantly pumped out, it was a great adventure. Why go again? Because prior to the rocky end to our trip, we had ibis\*\* fly by, found loons, and cormorants, and had an adult laughing gull\*\* feed leisurely behind our boat.

November and December brought red-throated, loon\*\*, more oldsquaws, and scoters, and king eider\* (BP), a parasitic jaeger\*\*, several Franklins' gulls, little gulls everywhere, snowy owls, a kittiwake, several northern shrike, both crossbills, another Thayer's gull, but most significant a lesser black-backed gull at Eastlake on November 14th (BP, JC, DT, TL).

The story left untold is all the trips that were taken in pursuit of particular birds not found. The love of the chase was often the only reward.

Many trips were made in pursuit of the reported mew gull. This bird was often seen on days when I was at Lorain and yet not seen by me until it was fortuitously relocated there on December 27th (BP, DT, JC). You win some . . . The thrill of finding dickcissels and yellow-headed blackbirds after dozens of tries was exciting. It heightens my sense of accomplishment when I do not have someone babysit the bird.

There are no great lessons from my experience in 1981. I have written this little summary is to release frustration in expressing what a marvelous experience I had. To some people their mecca is on Attu, some to chase a speckled flowerpiercer, some to get their name in American Birds, some to bird a park a couple blocks from their home. Whatever turns you on, I sincerely hope you get as much satisfaction and enjoyment as I had this past year. I don't know how Jim Fry has done it all these years. I'll be sitting at home on January 1, 1982, with a sandwich and a beer watching the Rose Bowl. I ended 1981 with 292 species which is remarkable when you consider that 291 species was my entire state total representing 12 years of birdwatching when I started the year. During the year I added 15 species to my state list so that I am now at 306 species. The 14 species of prior years that were missed in 1981 include purple sandpiper, goshawk, pomarine jaeger, black-headed gull, Sabine's gull, Heermann's gull, tufted duck, golden eagle, common eider, ivory gull, red phalarope, Bachman's sparrow, painted redstart, and northern gannet.

In any good year there are some birds that are missed. Some of the birds that I know were reported by others are summarized below. I have underlined those species that I chased unsuccessfully.

Brant	<u>Black-headed Gull</u>
<u>Goshawk</u>	<u>Burrowing Owl</u>
Golden Eagle	<u>Western Kingbird</u>
Gyr Falcon	<u>Bohemian Waxwing</u>
Purple Sandpiper	<u>Pine Grosbeak</u>
Ruff	<u>LeConte's Sparrow</u>
<u>Red Phalarope</u>	<u>Clay-colored Sparrow</u>
Pomarine Jaeger	<u>Harris Sparrow</u>
Heermann's Gull	<u>Smith's Longspur</u>

My biggest misses for the year were purple sandpiper, LeConte's sparrow, red phalarope, goshawk, and brant.

One lesson that I learned in 1981 was that it is possible to reach 275 species by birding several weekends each month. If 1981 had been a good year for accidents, 300 would have been a probability. For example, January 2, 1982, brought purple sandpiper and red phalarope to northern Ohio--both of which I missed.

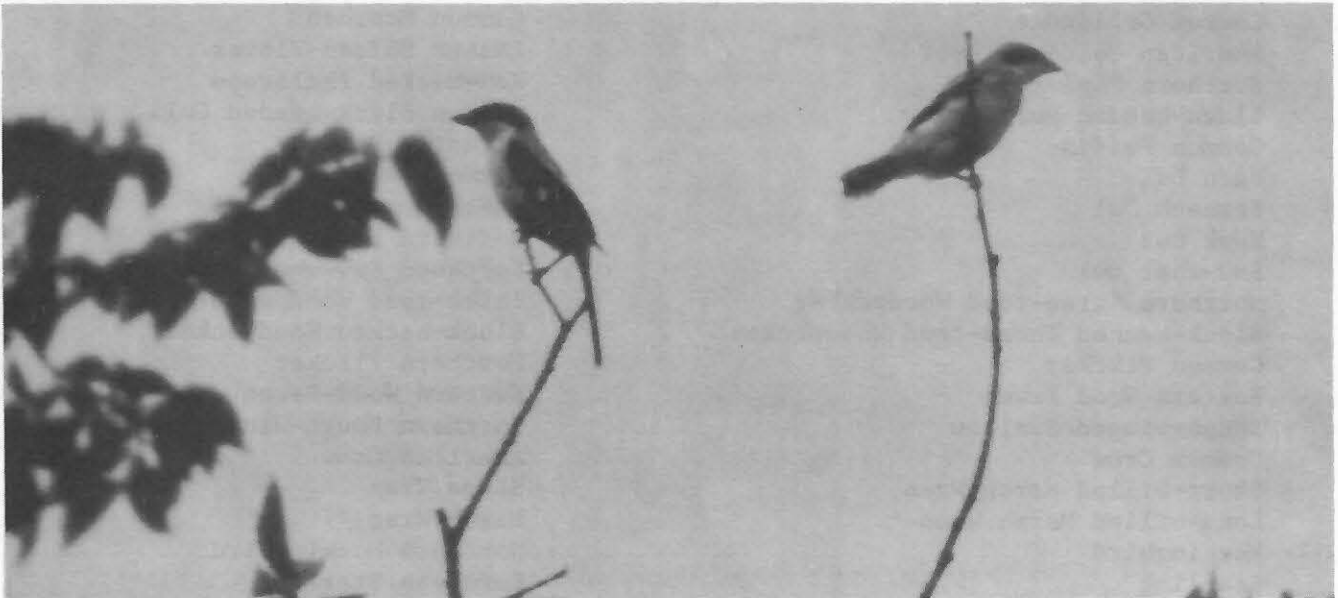
Three hundred Ohio birds in a year will have to be reserved for someone with unlimited time. I've had my day in court, thanks to all of you that helped.

#### Editor's Notes:

The asterisk (\*) means a record for this bird at this location on this date was accepted by the Ohio Records Committee. The double asterisk (\*\*) means that the record approved was submitted by Mr. Hocevar. The mew gull is still under consideration by the Committee.

HB: Howard Besser; JC: Jerry Carro; JH: Jean Hoffman; BNK: Bill and Nancy Klamm; TL: Tom LePage; BP: Bruce Peterjohn; EP: Ed Pierce; DT: Don Tumblin; LVC: Laurel Van Camp; RW: Ray Wlodarski.

Mr. Hocevar submitted with this article an annotated list of each of the 292 species seen with the date and location and other details of each sighting but space doesn't permit reproduction. He also provided the map.



Loggerhead shrike, male and female near nest in Madison County, Ohio on June 9, 1982 photographed by John Pagacnik.