

Pete Dunne

Illustration by Keith Hansen



Little Lost Blue

“The Big Day — two hundred and ten species, an auspicious total. But the bird I remember most is the one that got away, the warbler, little lost blue.”

“STOP,” PETE COMMANDED. And there’s a lot of command wrapped up in the likes of my ol’ friend Pete Bacinski. I was responsive to suggestion (as responsive as people who have gone 31 straight hours without sleep can be). And Saab 9000s are obliging little beasts. But there are certain laws governing bodies in motion. And how they tend to stay

in motion, the other members of the Zeiss (Guerrilla) Birding Team had stepped onto the roadway — into a spring morning that smelled like the Michelin man had just backed into a Bunsen burner.

Bacinski led the charge. This was his turf and his stakeout. *Pete Bacinski*, coordinator of the Highland’s Breeding Bird Survey. *Pete Bacinski* who is

“Here,” he whispered, gesturing toward a wall of second growth woodlands. “I had the female yesterday. Just wait.”

We did wait, patient as sprinters in the blocks, *watching* for a vibrating branch, *listening* for a telltale “chip” or diagnostic song. Waited five...ten...fifteen...almost *thirty seconds!*

Almost an eternity on a Big Day.

“Come on, bird,” Pete pleaded in tones one usually reserves for the bumper ahead of you in a Turnpike traffic jam.

“*Shpeee, shpee, shpee, shpee, shpeesH,*” he urged, translating his please into “Pish” a universal bird language that is to passerines what Swahili is to East African tribes.

But the bird didn’t speak Pish. We tried “Squeek” and “Chip” in various dialects and finally “Whinny” (an ancient hunting language spoken by screech-owls) all with much the same results. None of us knew Esperanto, and tapes, of course, are banned from the World Series of Birding.

After two minutes or so, teammate Don Freiday’s attention had wandered toward the clouds and any raptors that might be passing through Rick Radis, too, had accepted the inevitable. Wife Linda glanced at her watch.

“The bird was right here yesterday,” Pete promised, stung by the bird’s betrayal. “It came right out.”

“Fie on ‘em,” I pronounced. (Well, something like that, anyway.) “We’ll just have to dig out a migrant somewhere along the route.”

Pete didn’t believe me and I can’t



in motion. So it took a little time for Pete’s will to be reflected in a *complete* stop (not that anyone actually waited that long).

Before the anguished screech of tires had faded, four doors were in motion. Before the key was out of the ig-

on a first-name basis with ever nesting warbler in the tract, and who knew their parents and grandparents, too. *Pete Bacinski* who can tell you that the only surefire place to find a Black-throated Blue Warbler on a workable New Jersey Big Day route is...

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fault him for that. I didn’t believe it either.

We sprinted to the car and four doors slammed with a report like a graveside salute. The Saab growled to life and before the growl could soften to a purr a kicked-down accelerator brought the turbo to a scream. There were still 400 miles of Big Day route ahead and there is little time during a Big Day to look behind. There would be a whole year reserved for that kind of contemplation —starting tomorrow. And the things you remember most are the misses.

I won’t say I understand the allure of the Big Day or understand what it is that prompts otherwise well-adjusted adults to behave like pool balls after a break, run around like lobotomized hamsters and ring up birds with the esthetic appreciation of an electronic price scanner. A Big Day brings out the Jekyll and Hyde in us and maybe a little Don Quixote and Karl von Clausewitz, too. It combines the truant allure of all-night poker games and the camaraderie of the ol’ deer camp.

It’s a challenging thing, an acquisitive thing. It’s a game that measures who and what we are.

Once each year, old men play it and say to themselves, “See I can still keep up with those young pups. Why, with just a little exercise I’m sure....”

Once each year, younger men do it and reach for the stars set beyond the reach of mortals by the immortal elders.

It’s a stone skipped across a lake for no other reason except that last year you got nine splashes and this year you want ten.

It’s a ritual, a rite of spring that binds us to birding’s past and offers communion with the elders whose passion for Big Days may even have surpassed our own.

The history of Big Days reaches deep into birding’s beginning. According to A.E. Eynon, writing in the *Urner Field Observer* (Vol. 5, No. 2)

May counts (“Spring Census”) used to be conducted in “various parts of the country” and the totals published in the *Wilson Bulletin*. Eynon’s article was printed in 1952 and the accounts published, by Eynon’s estimates, 35 years earlier. that would place these prototype Big Days around 1917.

But the early hotbed of Big Day interest was unquestionably the Northeast. The two men most responsible for stoking the coals were Ludlow Griscom of Massachusetts and Charles Urner of New Jersey. Both were Big-Day fanatics and both often teamed up to conduct their Big Day runs. On May 19, 1927, the two set out to beat back a challenge issued by Allan Cruickshank and R.J. Kuerzi who had recorded 120 species in the “Bronx region” on May 15, “a new record for the Atlantic Coast.”

Griscom and Urner began their quest in Troy Meadows, a large freshwater marsh 20 miles west of Manhattan. Morning found them working the hills around Boonton for migrants then on to Essex County Reservation and finally to the Elizabeth and Newark estuaries. Their strategy and skill garnered 130 species and the record.

Big-Day routes are not stagnant affairs. They require constant fiddling and periodic revamping. Urner’s route was no exception. It got longer and the ante got higher. In 1928 Urner’s appetite for a bigger list carried him as far south as Manasquan, New Jersey. This necessitated three extra hours of driving time, but it garnered a whopping 145 species. Just one year later the route was extended again.

In a letter to Julian K. Potter of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club, dated May 20, 1929, Urner relates that: “I have been trying to map out a one day route that would give the biggest possible list and I believe that 160 species is a possibility. On May 11 alone I got 141; on may 17 with Edwards, Kuerzi, and Walsh we got 154

and at least 2 of us saw or heard them all; on May 19 with Baker, Dumont, and Nelson we had 153....The plan as now developed is to leave Elizabeth at 3AM, going to Troy Meadows, then past Boonton Reservoir to the hills about Boonton which yield the ‘high ground’ warblers and assorted wood migrants. If gaps occur in the land bird list a stop is made at Elizabeth where Screech owl and a few others are added. One day (the 17th) we stopped also on Newark Meadows, but on the 19th we went directly to Manasquan River, inland, then Manasquan Inlet From there without stop to Brigantine (note: the town, not the refuge which wasn’t built, yet), ending up at Manasquan River (inland) for the evening voices.”

Ah, and I can imagine them, these greats of the founding age, sitting around Urner’s kitchen table, making last-minute adjustments to their route. I can see the string of dark figures mincing their way down the narrow boardwalk through Troy Meadows, their pants soaked by morning dew, their breath leaving puffs of vapor where they pass. I can envision the line faltering as one of the leader’s stops... cups hands behind ears...then gestures into the darkness. You can name the birds found by these Urner Club members because they are matters of record. Between 1930 and 1950: American Bittern (20 out of 20 years), Least Bittern 19/20), Virginia Rail (20/20), and Sora (20/20).

Have I imagined it or have I really seen bent and dog-eared black-and-white photos of men perched on running boards driving slowly down back roads, ears cocked and eyes alert of the birds spring? Birds like Red-shouldered hawk (20/20), Upland Plover (19/20), Pheasant (20/20), Brown Thrasher (20/20), Least Flycatcher (20/20) Worm-eating Warbler (20/20), Chestnut-sided Warbler (20/20), Parula Warbler (20/20), Black-throated Blue

Warbler (20/20), Myrtle Warbler (20/20), Black-throated Green (19/20), Blackpoll Warbler (20/20), Hooded Warbler (20/20), Canada Warbler (20/20), Magnolia Warbler (19/20), Olive-backed Thrush (20/20), Gray-cheeked Thrush (20/20), Henslow's Sparrow (19/20), Vesper Sparrow (19/20).

I know I have seen, in a scrap book, candid shots of Big-Day birders up to their tired bare arses in the surf off the southern tip of Long Beach Island. I can only take my hat off to men who, at the end of a Big Day, would contemplate that murderous march (or would jump into 50° ocean water).

Urner's predicted 160 was forged into reality in 1930 but the high water mark wasn't reached in 1933. On May 14, 1933, Urner, Ludlow Griscom, Joe Hickey, Richard Pough and the rest of an *eleven person hit squad*, ran Urner's fine-turned route and nailed 173 species for the party list (including Yellow Rail and Arctic Tern!). It was a record that lasted a long, long time.

The Saab bounced down a road that barely rates inclusion on a New Jersey road map. "There's one other place that *might*, have a Black-throated Blue," Pete counseled. "I think it's worth a try."

We tried it. And it didn't

We drove right past the "Hills of Boonton," Urner's dawn site, and never gave a thought to stopping there. Nobody's run a Big-Day route through that suburban patchwork in years.

We could have gambled and gone down to Scherman-Hoffman Sanctuary or the Great Swamp N.W.R., but that would have added 1/2 hour to our route with no promise of tangible return. Not a very smart thing to do on a Big Day.

No, one way or another, we were committed to a strategy, the same strategy now used by most teams entered in the World Series of Birding—a strategy that was, like Urner's, predicated upon the times. Today's strategy differs markedly from that used by Urner and his cronies. *Their* strategy hinged upon catching the waves of migrating birds that sweep across the Northeast during May. Today's strategy calls for a methodical, point-by-point, bird-by-bird, inventory of staked-out nesting species. A Big Day route is no more than a line drawn between feathered points.

"OK, go 2/10 of a mile. Stop at the

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pullout on the right. Listen for Canada and Magnolia. Also Hooded.

Canada and Hooded. Check/Check.

"Do we have a backup for Maggie?"

"Next stop and one other location. Go 3/10 of a mile and pull off just in front of a large white pine. I had creeper on Monday, also Maggie. This is where the Yellow-rumped nested three years ago.

"Three tenths. Got cha."

No serious Big Day effort in New Jersey builds its strategy around hitting migrant traps any more. Why? Because they don't work often enough to make them worth the risk, not even close to a coin-toss chance of return. They don't work, because the flood of migrants that used to sweep the state, that inspired Urner's Big Days, has been reduced to a sputtering trickle. If Charles Urner and his cronies were to run their traditional Big-Day route today, their total probably wouldn't crack 150. And the terrible silence that would greet them at their dawn chorus site would shatter their souls. Why, they might just wander home, curl up into the fetal position, put their thumbs in their mouths, and rock back and forth.

Sometimes I want to do that myself.

There are birders who are disdainful of Big Days. They are frivolous and silly affairs (they say). They cheapen serious birding and reduce an esthetic pursuit to a frenetic game. A Big Day, (they lecture) doesn't have the utilitarian payoff of atlasing or potential conservation benefits of shorebird surveys or hawk counts.

And all these criticisms are valid. But it is wrong to say that Big Days are valueless. For one thing, they are fun and in this age of this world, real fun is a very rare and very valuable commodity. And for another, they offer historic

perspective, a window to another age of birding and a yardstick to measure change and loss.

There aren't twenty years of World Series of Birding team totals but there are seven. An on the World Series there are multiple teams of skilled birders scouring the countryside with an intensity that makes Christmas Bird Counts look like a stroll through the park. In 1990 there were 40 teams.

And if you look at all the team totals for the past seven years you find many of the birds that Urner took for granted just don't grow on trees any more.

For instance, Least Flycatcher, a bird never missed by Urner, has been recorded by only 41% of all World Series teams. Gray-cheeked Thrush, *never missed by Urner*, has been recorded by only 19% of all World Series teams.

Golden-winged Warbler, another bird with a 20/20 record, has been tallied by only 43% of all teams. And Worm-eating Warbler, missed by every third World Series team, was never missed by Urner.

And then there is Black-throated Blue...or, perhaps it is more accurate to say: then there *isn't* Black-throated Blue.

We finished our big Day with 210 species — a total beyond the reach of Urner's dreams. All it took was 50 plus years of Big Day tradition, the combined wisdom of seven World Series of Birding Competitions. All it took was an Interstate Highway system to whisk us along and a Saab 9000 to whisk along it. All it took was 500 person-hours of team scouting, one full state dry run of our route and 180 World Series of Birding participants all scouring the state and pooling their sightings prior to the May 19 Big Day.

Two hundred and ten species. An auspicious total and an effortful one.

But the bird I remember most is the one that got away, the warbler that Urner never missed. Little lost blue. In the year to come, I will give a lot of thought to that bird and what it suggests about birding's future. ■

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