
February eventually surrenders. March brings the equinox and the first north-bound migrants; add a dash of sparrow song and some greenery peeking through the snow, and you have hope. And hope, as Emily Dickinson noted, is “the thing with feathers.” Winter birding can wait for another nine months.

In the meantime, we learn more about winter bird distribution and abundance, and we keep our sanity in the face of gales, vitamin D deficiency, and S.A.D. Just ask Ryan Dudragne, compiler for Saskatchewan, where they *really* have winter: “A winter list gives birders something to do for the three slowest months. Great for maintaining enthusiasm, it gets a person out to ward off the winter doldrums that can

creep up mid-season.” Or even sooner.

As yet, no US state plays the game, though some certainly experience a true winter. (If you are unsure, re-read the first paragraph above. Add points if you know what curling is). Alaska, Maine, Michigan, Montana? We would welcome you to the fold. And winter listing seems a perfect fit for Scandinavia.

See you on the winter birding trail.

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PETE'S TIPS: Big Day, Little Things

BY PETE DUNNE

It might be called a Big Day, a 24-hour birding marathon, but Big Days are made up of small events, and these, in sum, make the difference between a fair Big Day run and a good one. Here are a few favorite tips of mine, one Big Day Birder to another.

Unlike relatives, neighbors, and workmates, you get to choose the people you go birding with, so choose well. Certainly your Big Day teammates should be skilled birders, but they must also match the level of intensity you bring to bear. For example, if some members of the team want to stop for lunch and you want to GO, GO, GO, there are bound to be problems (and the repercussions will linger past coffee and dessert).

Even the largest vehicles get very, very small when things go bad on a Big Day. Speaking of which...

The ideal Big Day car has (at least) four doors, a sunroof, windows that go all the way down (in the back, too), and no anti-theft alarm. It should be roomy enough that team members in the back seat don't sit ham to ham. There should be lots of trunk space for materials (meaning food) and apparatus (meaning spotting scopes).

On the World Series of Birding, minivans with two sliding side doors have become increasingly popular. Teams rent them at the airport and then drop them off under the cover of darkness.

Then they run.

Bring backup binoculars. In the event of rain, it's quicker to whip out your spare at a critical moment than to wipe off your lenses. Also, if one of your teammates utters that most fateful of proclamations at 5 minutes to midnight: “Oh damn. I left my binoculars on the kitchen table,” you will be everyone's savior.

Be aware that birds are often visible (not just vocal) at night. Look as well as listen. Owls and bitterns can be seen flying above a star-lit horizon. In urban areas, lakes, ponds, rivers, and bays can be scoped using high-performance instruments and no greater light source than the ambient light cast by the city.

During your nocturnal run, plan to spend half an hour on

some silent, open, deserted hilltop about first light (an hour and twenty minutes before sunrise). Many migrating birds are vocal, and as the light grows, birds will be moving from roosting to feeding areas. You'll catch them on the fly.

Don't worry about missing the opening notes of the dawn chorus at your chosen dawn site. Many teams stand around waiting for species to sing when they could just as easily get there half an hour later, listen for five minutes, and clean up on the whole lot.

Also, consider having a freshly filled hummingbird feeder out at your dawn sight. It will save you the trouble of staking out a feeder later in the day.

Appoint a Listmeister, someone who is responsible for keeping up the list and updating it at the end of every major stop. Too many teams have noted too late that some common species was missed early on and now, because of habitat or range, the bird is beyond reach.

The way to add species is to add habitat-calibrated stops. The way to really sabotage a Big Day is to have to cut stops at the end of the day because you run out of time. Try to add an hour of wiggle-room to your route—in *daylight*. It will give you a buffer to keep you close to schedule if you are running late (and you probably will be). It will also give you the option of spending a little more time at a location if you run into a real windfall (like a good migratory pocket).

Finally, when it gets dark and you find you are too tired to go on, don't! Most teams that doggedly go on 'til midnight find that they add no more than one or two species (and often they add none).

When you get tired, stop. Safety first; safety last.

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