

Big Day on a Bike

By Harold Eyster

Into the seemingly impenetrable blackness we biked. It was 5:30 am and Andy Johnson, a young birder, and I were embarking on a 'Big Day on a Bike', trying to see as many species as we could with bikes as our only transportation, through corn fields, cattail marshes, and a few Oak-Hickory forests in southeastern Michigan's Washtenaw County.

One of the things that I look forward most to every spring is the Migratory Bird Count, when we drive around Lima Township and count all the birds we see. I always have a great time. There's only one thing that dampens my delight: by driving the hundred and some miles, even though I may be helping birds by surveying them, I am in some way hurting the birds, both from air pollution by burning fossil fuels and noise pollution from the car's engine. In addition, most of the roads that we drive on are unpaved, gouged with potholes and washboards, which can be damaging to any car.

But on this day, we were riding bikes, easily avoiding the holes. And, as I had no conscience telling me that what I was doing was in anyway hurting the environment, I had a truly superb time.

After biking about a half mile we crossed over Mill Creek and heard our first bird, an Eastern Wood-pewee. Continuing, we heard a Wood Thrush, and assorted others. We went a bit further and came to a steep decline. We sped up until we were nearly flying. A robin came out of the woods and flew along just above our heads, eventually it overtook

us as the hill ended. It made me feel very connected to our feathered friends, I felt almost as though I was flying with that bird.

One of the drawbacks to birding by bike instead of by car is that it takes a lot longer to get from one birding locale to another, but when you are on a bike you can be listening and looking constantly, with no windshield to hinder your vision and no engine to obscure the sounds around you, so you can be constantly birding.

Another drawback is weather. When you are biking, and it starts raining, you're going to get wet, as wet as the birds you are watching! So in a way, you feel like you're really part of it all. A third drawback is that it takes a lot of energy to ride a bike, and so you can't bird for as long, but you can get your exercise while birding, a much more enjoyable and rewarding way to do it.

Finally, there's no back seat or trunk on a bike in which you can stow supplies, so your equipment needs to be chosen carefully. We didn't take any field guides, just notebooks, We did take a small scope, but didn't have room for a tripod so we took a monopod, which was satisfactory, but far from ideal.

However, the benefits of biking far outweigh the limitations. For example, on the corner of Trinkle and Lima Center Roads, we were delighted to hear a Sedge Wren, in a spot that I'd never heard one before. Passing Lima Center Road, we listened for owls. Hearing nothing, we attempted to call one with our own vocalizations. We were about to give up and move on, when we saw a small bird silhouetted against the pre-dawn sky. A Screech-Owl, perhaps drawn in by our hand-cupped chortles! We watched it for an

instant; then it silently flew away. At a cattail marsh, we heard Swamp Sparrows. Going a bit further, we heard Yellow-throated Vireos.

Just east of where Trinkle Road doglegs on Dancer Road, we came upon the locally renowned 'Trinkle Marsh'. Just as we got there, the sun began to rise through the fog. Nearly forty Wood Ducks in eclipse plumage were swimming on the surface, the males looking untidy and scruffy, unlike their usually urbane appearance. Purple Martins were diving and swooping over the heads of Great Egrets, Green Herons, and Killdeers. Eastern Kingbirds, Red-winged Blackbirds, Song Sparrows, Willow Flycatchers, Yellow Warblers, Common Yellowthroats, and Marsh Wrens frolicked in the early morning sun.

Our next stop was the corner of Dancer and Liberty Roads where there was a large field on one side, and a large wood on the other. We had just stopped our bikes to listen, when we heard both Black and Yellow-billed Cuckoos, calling at the same time, probably the first time I've ever had them in the same place. Other notable birds were Red-eyed Vireos, Field Sparrows, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Eastern Towhees, an Orchard Oriole, and a male Ruby-throated Hummingbird as it flitted evanescently among the oaks. We would have stayed longer, except we were forced to leave by hordes of mosquitoes.

It was already 9:00 and very hot. Our next stop was the Miller-Smith Woods, an oak preserve where I usually see many forest birds. But today, we arrived too late. While most other birds were still actively foraging, the forest birds had become phlegmatic and we saw none.

On the way to the trustworthy Four Mile Lake, we saw Wild Turkeys by the side of the road. We then stopped by my secret spot where Soras and Virginia Rails are

usually present and vocal. True to their reputation, the rails called just as we rode by. We got to Four Mile Lake at 9:30 AM and saw Mute Swans, more Green and Great Blue Herons, and a plethora of Great Egrets. Flying above us were Chimney Swifts and Turkey Vultures. We also spotted more Marsh Wrens and an albino Cowbird fledgling begging food from a reluctant Red-winged Blackbird. Just as we were leaving, we were pleasantly surprised when a juvenile Bald Eagle flew over the lake.

On the corner of Trinkle and Lima Center roads, we rounded out our raptors with two Red-tailed Hawks and an American Kestrel. Then on Pinecrest Lane we found an Eastern Meadowlark, and all of the Michigan swallows, including: Northern Rough-wings, Banks, Barns, Cliffs, Trees and Martins. I think that it's the first time I have seen all six of them at once, and they were in a subdivision, where you'd never think to look. We ended the day at Pierce Lake where we searched for Mallards without luck, but we did manage to hear a Carolina Wren.

We biked approximately 40 miles in Lima Township, and saw 74 species: almost two species per mile! Our biggest misses were Warbling Vireos, Mallards, Scarlet Tanagers, and Sandpiper species.

It was a Big Day for us. We were able to spend the whole time birding, not half of it sitting in a noisy car. I felt much more in touch with the birds since we were all using self-propulsion. And I could really enjoy it without my conscience telling me that I was hurting the environment.