

Bluffviews

A quarterly newsletter by Clifftop

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Counting Birds

Text and photos by Joann Fricke

Have you ever done a Christmas or Spring Bird Count? It's a challenge if you are in the field. I'll never forget my first. I was walking the trails on my property with a very experienced birder. It was a windy Spring day and the leaves had already emerged on the trees. As we walked, she would call out the name of a bird she heard and then would point in the direction from which the sound came. I not only couldn't see the bird, but didn't hear its call, much less recognize it. I guess it's pretty obvious--I was a newbie!

Since that day, I've learned to identify the calls and songs of many of the most common birds in our area, including the laughing call of the White-breasted Nuthatch, the Eastern Phoebe which sings its name and the Mourning dove, right, with its quiet "coo." One day, I heard the very loud song of what turned out to be an extremely small bird. It was a Carolina wren. One of my favorites is the call of the Pileated woodpecker, a large and unmistakable bird. If you enjoyed the Woody Woodpecker cartoons as a youngster, you would recognize a Pileated.



A bird that is not well named is the Red-bellied Woodpecker, left. Rarely is the slight red wash on its belly visible. They are more easily identified by the black and white barred patterns on their back. Adult males have a red cap going from the bill to the nape of the neck; females have a red patch on the nape and another above the bill. They are noisy birds, having many varied calls, and I often hear them while working in the woods.



The Blue Jay, seen at left, appears to be a bully, as other birds scatter when it visits my birdfeeder. Did you know that this bird is not actually blue? The pigment color in these birds' feathers is a shade of brown. Our eyes perceive them to be blue due to light scattering and refraction. This optical illusion occurs when light touches the bird's feathers and bends (refracts). We view this refracted light as blue!

I now have enough confidence to participate in the Christmas bird count, albeit from inside my house while watching two birdfeeders!

A Big Day

Text and photos by Michael Avara

When people think about having a 'Big Day,' many things may come to mind, but in my case on May 13, 2022, it would mean driving 750 miles across Illinois over the course of 24 hours to observe 205 different species of birds. Now THAT was a Big Day!

For those outside the birdwatching community, Big Days are quests undertaken by birdwatchers to observe as many species as they can in a 24 hour period in a given area. Individuals complete Big Days at the county, state, and even national level. While some see it as a competition, I see it more like a scavenger hunt to find and appreciate as much of the biodiversity a given area has to offer.

Regardless of one's perspective, it takes good teammates, strategy, and a great deal of luck to get a large number of species. Thankfully we had all three on that day...

Our team consisted of Colin Dobson, a senior at the University of Illinois, Mike Ward, an ornithologist with the Illinois Natural History Survey and University of Illinois, Mark Vukovich, a biologist with the US Forest Service, and myself. All of us share a passion for birds and find ourselves frequently outside birdwatching.



Indigo Bunting



Least Sandpiper

Having assembled the team, we devised a strategy. Illinois is a large state with diverse habitats, and any given spring, waves of migrating birds can sometimes only be found in certain parts of the state depending on the timing. And of course, we had to think about driving time versus time outside of the vehicle birding.

The plan was to begin in central Illinois and work our way south as the day progressed. The difference in latitude would hopefully allow us to observe stragglers of earlier migrating species

(primarily waterfowl) and later migrating species just arriving to the south. And of course the date would need to be timed with peak migration for the state of Illinois for all other species. We would visit small towns, marshes, mudflats, rivers, lakes, prairies, swamps, hayfields, pastures, and forests in a path that would traverse over 15 counties beginning near Shelbyville and ending near Metropolis.

Of course this path was far from random. The previous week the four of us had scouted out several of the areas. Combined we had participated in the Illinois Spring Bird Count for Brown, DeWitt, Gallatin, Monroe, Morgan, and Union counties in addition to the miles Colin covered as practice runs in the days prior.



Yellow-breasted Chat

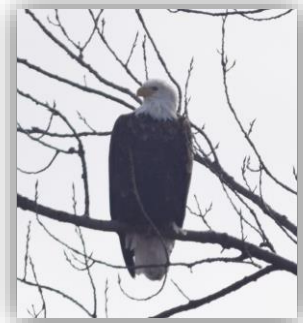
When the Big Day finally arrived, luck was on our side. Weather was perfect with mild temperatures, low winds, and plenty of sun. We were able to locate many of the waterfowl stragglers weeks after the large flocks had already migrated further north. And of course, migration was at its peak with loud choruses of birds singing in the morning hours of the day. The night hours brought calling owls, whip-poor-wills, and king rails.

May 13, 2022 was a 24 hour long journey filled with birds and camaraderie, and even more—a new state record for the most species observed in the state in a day. Our quest was more successful than we could have anticipated, and after being awake for 24 hours straight, I settled in for a long restful sleep.

Editor's note: Michael Avara is the Avian Lab Manager & Field Coordinator at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign and a life Clifftop member.

Watch future newsletters and your email inbox for more information on our 2023 Upcoming Events...

Kaskaskia Eagle Fest—Saturday, March 4, 9:00 am - 3:00 pm, Kaskaskia River Recreation Area, 4800 Lock and Dam Road, Modoc, IL. For more information visit: <https://www.greatriverroad.com/eagle-events/kaskaskia-23>



Native Snakes of SW Illinois—Sunday, May 21. Time: TBD. White Rock Nature Preserve. Presented by Justin Elden, Curator of Herpetology & Aquatics at the St. Louis Zoo. As an added bonus, attendees will get to visit Rattlesnake Glade.

Perseid Meteor Shower—Friday or Saturday, August 11 or 12. Time: TBD. Paul Wightman Subterranean Nature Preserve. Presented by Dr. Michael J. Krawczynski, assistant professor in the Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences at Washington University, St. Louis.



Other programs on which we are still working out details are “Buzz on Bees 2.0” and “Winter Tree ID.” And, of course, our annual “Membership Day.”



THANK YOU to those members who responded positively to our annual appeal letters that were mailed in early December. If you haven't yet renewed your membership, please consider doing so at your earliest convenience. We appreciate your continued support!

Images from a prescribed burn conducted at PWSNP on 1/6/2023



Images 1, 2 and 3 are drone photos taken by Shane Kellogg of Mission Timber. What a great view of the progression of the fire and how the trail system crisscrosses the landscape.

Image 4 was also taken by Shane as fire blazed along the Oerter Foundation ADA Accessible Trail. Image 5 was captured from the security camera atop the Zimmer Family Foundation Pavilion.



It was a long day and we are thankful for each of the volunteers who came out to assist!