

Philadelphia Larus

the newsletter of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club

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The Secrets of a N.J. 'Big Day'

by RICK MELLON

9:00 p.m., Friday, May 18, 1990: Left my house in Yardley, Pa., for Kearny Marsh in northern New Jersey. Kearny is our first stop on the New Jersey Audubon Society's seventh annual "World Series of Birding," a midnight-to-midnight birding challenge whose goal is to identify by sight or sound the most species within the boundaries of the state. The event also serves as a fundraiser for NJAS and the teams' sponsors.

1988 was the first year for our team, which is one of two teams sponsored by the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club. Our team includes Paul Guris (Mr. Ears), Bill Stocku (Mr. Eyes), Johnny Miller (Mr. Both) and me (Mr. Planner).

Having organized a team, we needed a route. The generally accepted optimum route includes North Jersey for the northern breeders, possibly central Jersey for a handful of specialties, then Brigantine National Wildlife Refuge (Forsythe) and the coast to Cape May for water birds.

Although the World Series organizers consider the DVOC team to be an in-state team since we all live within 50 miles of New Jersey, to me, North Jersey is practically a foreign country. There is nothing there that isn't more plentiful, generally closer to home and in wilder country in northern Pennsylvania.

Besides, North Jersey isn't our turf — it belongs to the Urner and Chapman clubs and New Jersey Audubon. Our pride (and common sense) told us we couldn't compete in their back yard. So we have concentrated on a route that writes off the northern breeders but picks up valuable time in the south for water birds.

However, after two years with limited luck at night, we have included Kearny Marsh and the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge — both north of Trenton — for marsh birds.

11:00 p.m.: We arrived at Kearny Marsh with one hour to nail everything down before the "Big Day" actually began. The chips, grunts and "peents" started falling in place. Virginia Rail, Gadwall, Common Moorhen, a single King Rail, Common Nighthawks. The Manhattan skyline shimmered in the distance. It was my first trip to Kearny, a neat place — and we were on a roll.

Then, a police car rolled up. Two. Three. We tell them we're bird-watching. Suspicious looks. Driver's licenses, bird books, binoculars. "What birds can you see at night?!"

Finally, they issue a warning: "There have been a number of stolen cars dumped here. Be careful." They left.

We went back to birding, as our \$22,000 loaner Blazer from Cahill Chevrolet and our optical warehouse supplied by Nikon sat just out of sight.

11:55 p.m. The wind picked up. The birds shut up.

12:00 a.m.: Saturday, May 18: The day began . . .

12:25 a.m.: The moorhen broke the silence and we left, with no rails, Gadwalls or nighthawks.

1:15 a.m.: The Great Swamp. I permanently blinded another birding team, as in my exuberance I forgot to switch my high beams to parking lights. (Oh well, one less competitor.) But the birds were great. Barred and Great-horned owls, Wood Ducks, Virginia, King and Sora rails and an Alder Flycatcher that called consistently — once every 20 minutes.

One of the Big Day rules is that 95 percent of the birds reported must have been identified by all members of the team. John and Paul heard the Alder call immediately, I heard it 20 minutes later and Bill allowed us to leave when it called a third time.

4:45 a.m.: Alpha. If the Great Swamp was great, Alpha was magical. The first rays of light crept through the scattered clouds on the northeastern horizon. The temperature was in the 40s, and the Song Sparrows and Common Yellowthroats were just starting to sing when we arrived. Our target bird, the Vesper Sparrow, hit full chorus at 4:50, so we headed up the road to the Horned Lark site. They were already skylarking in spite of a marauding Barn Owl.

On to the Grasshopper and Savannah sparrow site, both of which cooperated fully.

5:15 a.m.: Frenchtown. As day broke, heading south along the river, we all got our binoculars out — except Johnny. "Next stop," he said, as we picked up Common Nighthawks. "I don't need binoculars for nighthawks."

Johnny Miller has developed a legendary reputation for his visual and aural capabilities. John LaVia tells of the time he focused in on a subtle field mark that Johnny was unable to pick up. LaVia's exuberance of out-observing the Great Johnny was quickly dashed when he realized Johnny wasn't using binoculars.

5:20 a.m.: Secret Location. Our "secret" stop had been discovered by the Silver Lake Nature Club team — the down side of joint scouting with other DVOC members. We heard Worm-eating Warbler, Dark-eyed Junco and Pine Warbler in a ravine, but we missed Ruffed Grouse and Brown Creeper. Johnny's Nikons still sat in the back of the Blazer.

6:15 a.m.: Bull's Island. Here we located our nailed birds — Yellow-throated and Cerulean warblers, Yellow-throated and Warbling vireos, Cliff Swallow and Acadian Flycatcher — and picked up a decent migration, too.

Johnny had a Philadelphia Vireo singing. Of course, he had to borrow our binoculars, since he hadn't gotten his out yet.

(Continued on Page 4)

For more information or detailed directions to any of the meeting places, call field trip chairman Earl Harrison, 215-592-7950 (home) or 215-842-6315 (work).

Sunday, April 7: Pedricktown, N.J. Meet for Ruffs at 6:30 a.m. on the causeway, Pedricktown Road. Leader: Frank Windfelder, 215-673-0240.

Friday to Sunday, April 26 to 28: Pokomoke weekend. Meet on Friday morning, at 8, or Friday night, at 9, on the road to Elliot Island, Md. Leader: Colin Campbell, 302-478-5263 (home) or 302-996-2905 (work).

Throughout May: May runs. Report sightings in any 24-hour period during May migration. Contact Earl Harrison for reporting forms.

Friday and Saturday, May 24-25: Pelagic trip to the Hudson Canyon. Meet at 8:30 p.m. on Friday night at 18th St. and the Bay in Barnegat Light, N.J. Boat returns at 6 p.m. on Saturday. Cost: \$75. Contact Alan Brady, 215-968-2833 (work) or 215-598-7856 (home) to see if space is still available. Don't forget sleeping bag and lunch. Hot drinks available on board.

Saturday, June 1: Meesing Nature Center and Worthington Tract. Meet at 7:15 a.m. in shopping center at Routes 402 and 209 in Marshall's Creek, Pa. Leader: Bill Murphy, 215-885-2488.

Sunday, July 21: Delaware Bayshore. Meet at 7:30 a.m. at the Greater Wilmington Airport on Route 13. Leader: Sandy Sherman, 215-237-6814 (home) or 215-893-5739.

Monday to Sunday, Aug. 19 to 25: Algonquin Provincial Park, Ontario, Canada. A week of canoeing and birding in the North Country. Share costs of approximately \$200 per person. Leader: Chris Dooley, 215-547-1834.

Saturday to Monday, Aug. 31 to Sept. 2: Labor Day Weekend at Cape May. Meet at dawn in the Higbee Beach parking lot on any or all days. Leader: Chris Dooley, 215-547-1834.

Saturday and Sunday, Oct. 5 and 6: DVOC Weekend, Barnegat Light to Cape May. Meet at Barnegat Lighthouse State Park on Saturday morning at 7:30. Leaders: Don Jones, 609-859-0281 (home) or 215-785-8010 (work), or Earl Harrison.

Philadelphia Larus

Send information you would like considered for publication in Philadelphia Larus to:

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215-893-5739 (work)

Birding in the Twilight Zone

by FRANK HAAS

As editor of *Cassinia*, one of my tasks is to verify the accuracy of all material that is printed.

One evening last year, I was going through the index that Bob Mercer and Chris Dooley had prepared, checking each entry against the actual article in each *Cassinia*. I had worked my way down to the entries for Albert Conway.

The third entry listed under Conway was "Golden-crowned Sparrow; 1966-67:30." I opened the 1966-67 issue to page 30 and began reading. I was just about finished the short article when the phone rang.

It was Eric Witmer, a co-author of *The*

Birds of Lancaster County, published by the Lancaster County Bird Club in 1984. The club was planning to reprint the book, and Eric was doing some research for the new edition. He was calling to see if I was familiar with a certain record about which there had been a rumor for many years in his area — a Golden-crowned Sparrow!

After I picked myself up from the floor, I told him what I had been doing, and we both had a good laugh. The rumor Eric had heard was that Roger Tory Peterson, of all people, had identified a Golden-crowned Sparrow in Lancaster County 30 or 40 years ago.

Since I hadn't quite finished the article, the issue was still open to the right page when Eric called.

On June 4, 1952, Conway caught a Golden-crowned Sparrow at a banding station near Easton, Northampton County. He kept it in captivity for several days, and some 200 persons came to see it.

During that period, he took it with him to Lancaster to a testimonial dinner for Peterson, who earlier in the day had received an honorary doctoral degree from Franklin and Marshall College.

The bird was released in Northampton County shortly thereafter. So, the rumor was true, sort of. Peterson had identified a Golden-crowned Sparrow in Lancaster in 1952, but the record stands for Northampton County.

Club Officers Re-elected at 1991 Annual Meeting

Brian Moscatello was re-elected president of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club at the group's annual meeting Jan. 3, 1991. Also re-elected were Dr. John J. Harding, vice president; Judge W. Hart Rufe, secretary; and Barbara M. Haas, treasurer.

Newly elected to Council for three-year terms are Earl Harrison and Paul Guris. They join Chris Dooley and Sandra Sherman, whose terms expire in January 1992, and Colin Campbell and William R. Stocku, who will serve until January 1993. Also serving on Council is Franklin C. Haas, editor of *Cassinia*.

Added to the list of club Fellows at the meeting were Catherine O. Brethwaite, Harrison, Robert Mercer, Patricia T. Sutton and Lee Yoder.

John C. Miller was accorded the title of honorary member.

The Witmer Stone Award for the best paper dealing with ornithological research not undertaken in the course of professional duties went to Richard Mellon for "An Ornithological History of the Delaware Valley Region," appearing in the 1988-1989 *Cassinia*.

Rufe was honored with the Julian K. Potter Award for outstanding contributions to field ornithology.

PROGRAMS

Meetings are normally held the first and third Thursdays of the month, beginning at 8 p.m., at the Academy of Natural Sciences, 19th St. and Benjamin Franklin Parkway, unless otherwise indicated. For information, call John Harding, program chairman, at 215-642-6394.

MARCH 7, 1991 — DAN BRAUNING, DVOC member and former project coordinator of the Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas: "Pennsylvania Ornithology: The Atlas and Beyond." Dan is currently a wildlife biologist/ornithologist for the Pennsylvania Game Commission.

MARCH 21, 1991 — JANET JACKSON, curator of education, Philadelphia Zoo, and BRUCE GOULD, nature photographer: "Photographic Safari of Kenya."

APRIL 4, 1991 — PAUL KERLINGER, Ph.D., director of the Cape May Bird Observatory: "Stopover Ecology: Transgulf Migration of Songbirds."

APRIL 18, 1991 — Annual slide contest. Categories: Birds, Natural History and Scenery. Three-slide limit in each category.

MAY 2, 1991 — JOHN GROVES, curator of birds at the Philadelphia Zoo: "Update on the Hawaiian Bird Project and Conservation of Other Pacific Island Birds." *N.B.:* This meeting will be held at the Zoo, 34th St. and Girard Ave. The bird house will be open for touring from 5:30 p.m. to 7 p.m.; a box supper will be served at 7, and the meeting will begin at 8.

MAY 16, 1991 — KENN KAUFMAN, author, tour guide and DVOC member: "How to Deal With an Unidentified Bird in the Field."

JUNE 6, 1991 — May Round-up Reports.

Informal meetings take place on the first Thursday of the month in July and August, and the first and third Thursdays of September. However, it is unclear as of this writing how the July 4 meeting will be rescheduled. Check with someone before showing up!

A Good Time Was Had by All



At the head table of DVOC's Centennial Banquet: Standing (from left) are Brian Moscatello, president; Franklin C. Haas, editor of *Cassinia*; Barbara M. Haas, treasurer; Ellie Harding; Dr. John Harding, vice president; and Armas Hill, chairman of the 1990 Centennial Committee. Seated (from left) are Janet M. Sedicino; Judge W. Hart Rufe, secretary; and Jewel Cummings.

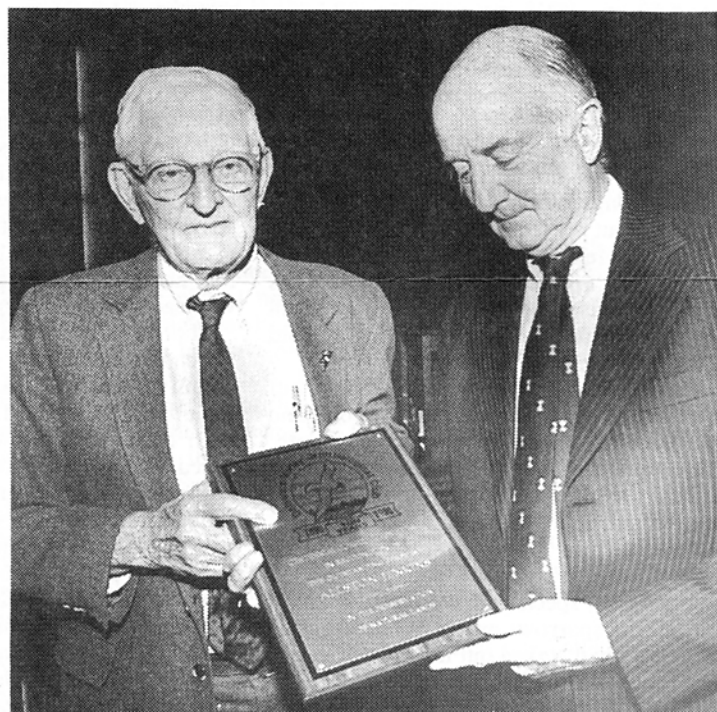
Photos by Cliff Hince



Banquet guest speaker Paul Butler (left) of the RARE Center for Tropical Bird Conservation signs an autograph for special guest Allan Keith, president of the American Birding Association.



During the cocktail hour, Dr. Frank Gill (left), head of the Ornithology Department of the Academy of Natural Sciences, chats with Edward S. Weyl (center), the club member of longest standing, and Alan Brady. Gill accepted a special award on behalf of the bird department, and Brady was among four men to receive the club's highest honor, the DEVOC Award.



Allston Jenkins (left) accepts a special Conservation Award from Phillips B. Street for his years of working to save habitat in the Delaware Valley. Street also was a DEVOC recipient, along with James K. Meritt and Dr. George B. Reynard. 8x10-inch prints of these and other photos are available from the photographer for \$5 each. For information, call Sandy Sherman, 215-237-6814.

'Big Day' Secret: The Eyes and Ears Have It

(Continued from Page 1)

6:45 a.m.: A small roadside pond for the Belted Kingfisher and Broad-winged Hawk. Good news/bad news. Bad news: We missed the birds. Good news: Having never seen the Nikon 8x30Es that the company provided us as team sponsors, Johnny had assumed they were bottom-of-the-line binoculars that you put around your neck at the finish line to make your sponsor happy.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Writer Pete Dunne, World Series of Birding organizer, rated the Nikon 8x30Es second only to Zeiss (his team's sponsor).

So, after I handed the binoculars to Johnny, he reluctantly started using them. Once he started, he didn't put them down all day.

7:00 a.m.: Linvale/Sourland Mountain was a gold mine. Not only were all our nailed birds extremely cooperative, but we also picked up Pine Siskin, Broad-winged Hawk, Pileated Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied and Willow flycatchers, and a host of migrant warblers.

As our push for passerines peaked, I felt unprepared. Some say scouting is everything, for there is very little time to look for new birds during the bird-a-thon.

I adhered closely to the philosophy that says, "You'd better have them nailed down or you'll probably missed them." I had spent most of the preceding seven days searching for specialties to nail down. I probably walked five miles of fields looking for Savannah, Grasshopper and Vesper sparrows before we worked Alpha into our route.

The result was a number of nailed specialties but no refresher course on the warbler songs. While in 1988, barely a bird sang without my recognizing it immediately, this year, I felt as if I had a tin ear. Johnny was picking up everything, with Paul at his heels. (Or was it the other way around?) Bill was right behind, and I kept saying, "Hold up," "What?" or "Where?"

8:30 a.m.: Trenton Marsh brought our warbler list up to 27, with the Hooded and Prothonotary staked our farther south. Unfortunately, last year's show-off Least Bittern was nowhere to be found.

Even so, our fortunes looked terrific. Before getting to Brigantine, our first coastal stop, we already had 136 species, including 29 species of warblers, 4 emps and all the sparrows except White-crowned (which we had staked out near New Gretna) and Lincoln's. We seemed to be headed for an easy 200. We might even break the record of 206!

11:15 a.m.: Our nailed White-crowned had flown the coop.

11:30 a.m.: Brigantine. Good news: We left Brig at 2 p.m. with 178 species. Bad news: Five scouted species had deserted us.

We missed Peregrine Falcon, Caspian Tern, Ruddy Duck, Western Sandpiper and Red-breasted Merganser, while only one unexpected species — eight breeding-plumage Lapland Longspurs flying up the dike — was found.

Even the birds we got didn't come easily. "Pintail!" "Got it." "Me, too." "Johnny, did you get it?" "Where?" "It just swam behind the island."

Johnny's energy levels were falling quickly. This was his fourth Big Day in seven days. No wonder he didn't pick up his binoculars — his eyes were closed.

And, to add to our concerns, the wind was picking up.

3:00 p.m.: Belleplain State Forest. A quick Prothonotary, but no Wild Turkey, Ruffed Grouse or Bald Eagle.

4:00 p.m.: Moore's Beach, along the Delaware Bay, where we expected to add some unusual shorebirds. Nothing here but lost time.

5:00 p.m.: Stone Harbor. As we arrived at this spot along the Atlantic coast, I realized we had had only one new bird in the past three hours. We missed the Purple Sandpiper and, with a strong northwesterly wind, no ocean birds were seen.

6:00 p.m.: Cape May. Our nailed Black and Surf scoters and Piping Plover cooperated, along with an unexpected Great Cormorant and a Bonaparte's Gull, but we missed Northern Gannet, both loons, Red-breasted Merganser, American Wigeon, Purple and Stilt sandpipers, and Caspian and Royal terns.

7:00 p.m.: Leaving South Cape May Meadows. As we dragged ourselves back to the car, having missed more staked-out birds, we fought fatigue and cursed our changing luck. We overheard rumors of a "good" bird at Lighthouse Pond, and we assumed it was probably the Cave Swallow that had been present a few weeks earlier, so we headed for the lighthouse.

Shortly after we arrived at the hawk-watch platform in the state park, the Bergen County Audubon team ran up, threw up their binoculars for 15 seconds, looked at each other and left without a word, at a speed I hadn't seen since about 10 a.m.

Frustrated at their obviously superior observational abilities in picking up the swallow quickly and mad at my own lack of energy, I put my binoculars on the first swallow to come by. Bingo! Cave Swallow. We all saw it before the Bergen County team made it to the parking lot. Our thanks to their inspiration. I found out later that the other team had not heard the rumor and had not seen the bird. They had just been looking for ducks on the pond.

8:30 p.m.: Goshen. Dusk, with a woodcock solo, followed by a goatsucker duet. A nice ending to daylight.

But now comes the time that can be

likened to the "wall" they talk about in marathon running. As daylight slips from the world, the body and mind refuse to be tricked into believing that no sleep is needed. After 40 hours without sleep and few chances for additional birds, half the mind says, "I'm outta here — good night," while the other half says, "You're not tired. Just a little longer. Keep going!"

Unfortunately, my fatigue had shown itself as an embarrassing string of quick, terrible (in fact, laughable) bird identifications over the past four hours. Fortunately, the others had managed to catnap during the day and quickly straightened out my mis-IDs.

9:30 p.m.: Dividing Creek. The Black Rails were very cooperative. But Paul Guris was not!

A few nights earlier, Paul and Chris Dooley had staked out a Sedge Wren here. We had the spot, the wind had stopped; all we had to do was listen. After five minutes of silence, Paul began squeaking. His limited success with an occasional Marsh Wren only encouraged his librarian imitations.

He should have taken his own advice. We couldn't hear anything. In my mind, I'm thinking, "Paul, quiet. . . I'll move another 20 yards down the road. . . Paul, keep it DOWN! Maybe I should grab some sleep in the Blazer. PAUL, SHUT UP! . . . I'll just lie down and take a nap in the road, the Blazer's too far. . ."

Finally, I heard the Sedge Wren call once. He probably had called a dozen times. The three others had heard only Paul.

10:30 p.m.: Left to return to Cape May. Up to this point, I had done all the driving. God only knows why. Bill is an excellent driver and can drive forever. His idea of a weekend trip is driving from Philadelphia to Miami and back to see a Bananaquit. Finally, having shed my ego and given in to exhaustion, Bill drove and I slept.

11:30: Cape May Point State Park. We joined approximately 100 other desperate birders, trying to pull out one of several Least Bitterns known to be inhabiting the ponds. The bitterns, suggested Bill, were totally overwhelmed by the army invasion of their habitat and were not about to announce their presence.

11:59 p.m.: Final tally: 196. On the negative side, that total was only good enough to tie for fifth place in an incredible year when the winning team had 210. On the positive side, I believe this was the highest total for a New Jersey team that didn't go north of I-78 during daylight hours.

With a decent afternoon, we could have easily broken 200 (the total of the second-place team).

12:30 a.m., Sunday, May 20, 1990: Johnny took his binoculars off.