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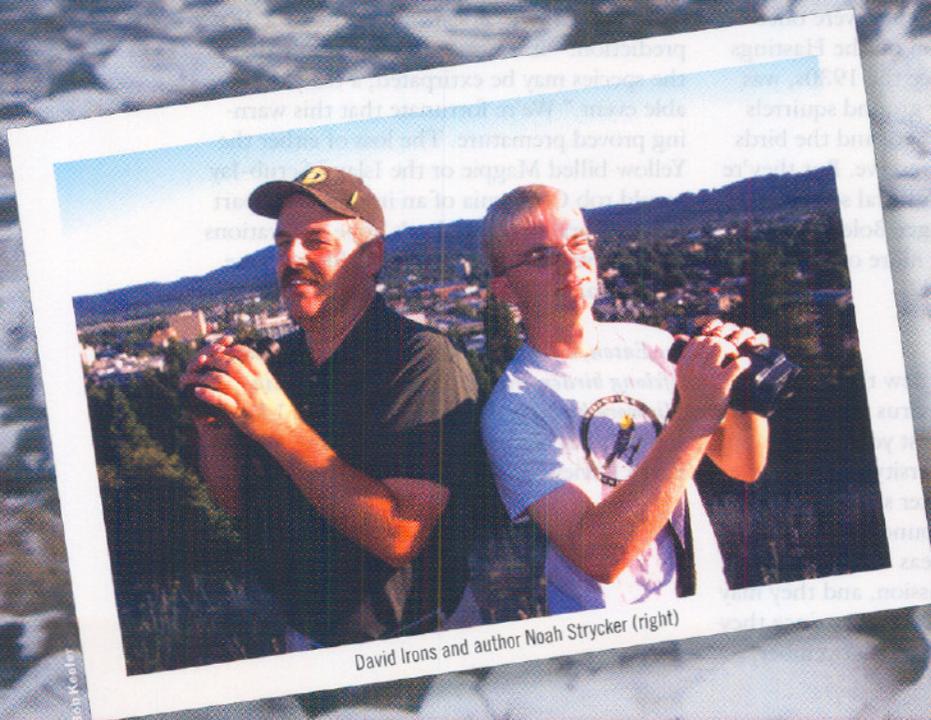


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Far Afield: by Noah K. Strycker

SECRETS OF A BIG DAY ADDICT

How to find more birds in 24 hours in your state than anyone in history — and have fun doing it



David Irons and author Noah Strycker (right)

Bohannon

Clinging to a slippery cliff over an angry ocean, soaked by horizontal rain, and slashed by gale-force winds, I was beginning to wonder if this was such a good idea.

I couldn't make out any birds in the swirling seawater anyway, besides the usual flotilla of scoters, and was considering the real possibility that I might lose my footing and fall to oblivion.

I looked at Dave. He looked back at me. We both shook our heads: "This is crazy!"

David Irons and I had been birding since midnight. It was now 5 a.m. and definitely time to move on. Persevering that day through wind, rain, and cold, we set a new Oregon Big Day record for January in 2004. You can do it, too.

The concept of a Big Day is simple: Find as many bird species as possible in 24 hours in a given location. In practice, it can be a real challenge, but it's a fun way to go birding, test your powers of observation, see a lot of species in a short time, and reap the fame and fortune that come along with breaking a Big Day record — minus the fortune and possibly the fame.

"Big Days are great levelers," says Scott Robinson of the University of Florida, holder of the world Big Day record. "Any birder, regardless of financial means, can compete more or less equally. Big Days require skill and local knowledge rather than the time and money necessary to compete in the big leagues of life listing."

A lister looks for birds at the edge of an angry ocean. You can set your own Big Day record without braving such elements, and your efforts are sure to make you a better birder.



Arthur Menzies

Think you have to be a super-birder to set a Big Day record? Anyone can do it, including you! To find out how, see the following page.

Robinson set the record with the late, great Ted Parker on September 5, 1982, when they found 331 species in one day in southeastern Peru. Several factors helped them achieve the impressive total. One was the location, the Cocha Cashu Biological Station in Manu National Park, a lowland tropical forest in which upwards of 570 species have been recorded. Robinson and Parker spent weeks scouting the area and getting to know the local birds. They picked a date when northern migrant birds would be present and breeding birds would be active and vocal. On the day, luck was with them, too. Even the weather cooperated.

"We did the entire day on foot and in a dugout canoe in an area of less than a square mile," Robinson recounts. "We started at 3:30 a.m., broke the existing record by about 10 a.m., and passed 300 by 11 a.m. Of course, we had no idea that we had broken the record! We stopped at 7 p.m., ate dinner, tallied the list, and were asleep by 8:30."

Other Big Days deserve recognition on a worldwide scale. According to the American Birding Association, second and third places go to Big Days in Costa Rica (308 and 306 species), and fourth place goes to a Big Day in central Panama (300 species) in which Douglas Robinson, an Oregon State University professor, participated in March 1997.

"Had we not been stuck in a traffic jam in Panama City for an hour, we could have broken the world record," he says today. "It delayed our arrival into the montane forests until after

most species had headed for the roost. Thus, we missed about 40 easy species, and we were only 31 shy of tying the world record. With only a little luck avoiding that traffic snarl, we would now be Big Day gods, but, alas, we are only also-rans."

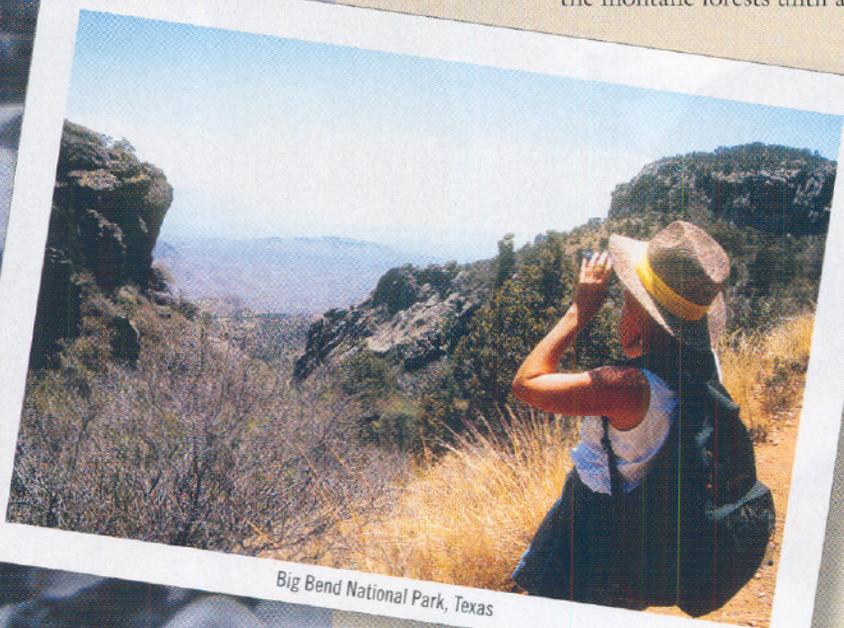
With scouting and some luck, Robinson believes the world Big Day record still can be broken in Panama.

Big Day records have been established in every state in the United States. Texas (258 species), California (231), Wisconsin (230), New Jersey (229), and Kansas (225) lead the pack. Manitoba (205) leads Canada's Big Days. Besides the all-time state and province records, monthly Big Day records have been set for most months in each state and province.

The history of the Big Day predates 1900, when bird enthusiasts such as Lynds Jones and others racked up one-day lists of 100 species on the Lake Erie shore in Ohio. Field guide pioneer Roger Tory Peterson relates a story of one of the first Big Days in Massachusetts in the 1930s, when he and a team of birders found 148 species — a new record for the state. In the ensuing years, as field guides, birdfinding resources, and transportation improved, Big Days have gained in popularity among birders of all skill levels.

Options for Every Birder

Like any good idea, the original Big Day concept has spawned spinoffs. The World Series of Birding, a no-holds-barred annual event organized by *Birder's World* columnist and Cape May Bird Observatory director Pete Dunne in 1984, pits birder teams against each other to find as many species as possible in one day in New Jersey. The Great Texas Birding Classic, sponsored by Texas Parks and Wildlife and the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, includes one-day and weeklong tournaments and might be the biggest, longest, and wildest birding competition. National Audubon Society raises money to support its conservation work with the annual Birdathon, a one-day competition coordinated by local chapters. A less exhausting alternative is the Big Sit!, which requires participants to remain inside a 17-foot circle for 24 hours, listing all the birds they see or hear in that time. The annual North American Birdwatching Open, sponsored by Audubon International, is a nation-



Big Bend National Park, Texas

Tom Vezo

wide event in which birders compete to find the most species in a day at more than 60 Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary golf courses. Local environmental groups also hold Big Day fund-raising events to support bird-conservation efforts.

Personally, I prefer to organize my own Big Day. That way, nobody has to know if it turns out to be a bust. I've had two memorable Big Days with fellow birder David Irons, and on both occasions we set state Big Day records for that month. With these successes under our belts, we are actually starting to believe we could attempt the all-time state or national Big Day record, a sure sign of Big Day addiction.

Our Attempt at a Record

First, we attacked the July Big Day record for Oregon (a paltry 103 species) and, at the same time, went for the July record for the lower 48 states (174). We planned a route of more than 500 miles from the coast inland. In theory, we would be able to check off birds quickly and efficiently as we crossed into new habitats. After a promising start — we had lucky sightings of a Barred Owl and a Horned Puffin, both rarities in the state — we wasted the morning in a fruitless and time-consuming search for shorebirds. This kept us from visiting all the planned inland spots in the afternoon and cost us a bunch of easy species like Cassin's Finch and Lincoln's Sparrow. We ended up with 165 species, setting a new Oregon July Big Day record but finishing just shy of the record for the 48 states.

For our second Big Day attempt, we chose the chilly month of January. Yes, this is a brutal time to go birding in Oregon, but we selected the month for a very good reason: There was no existing record for January in the state, so we were guaranteed to set the standard. As it turned out, the day tested our endurance skills more than anything. Our route called for too much driving time and not enough birding, and the weather could not have been worse. In the pelting rain, we had trouble seeing the car, much less the birds, and the screaming wind drowned out any hope of hearing bird calls and songs. We missed so many common birds throughout the day that it got to be a joke:

"Think we'll see a Downy Woodpecker at the next stop?"

"Nah, they're too common!"

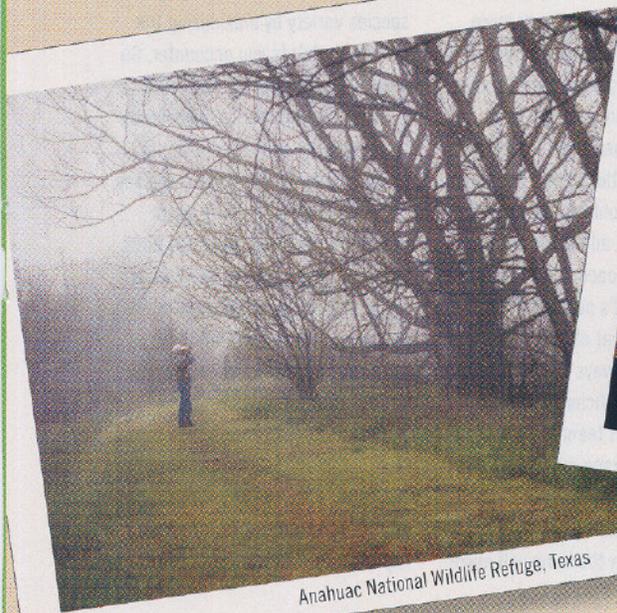
Unexpected bonus birds like Ruffed Grouse and Prairie Falcon kept us going. By day's end, we managed to dig up 112 species, not bad for the dead of winter.

My Big Day experiences, though imperfect, have given me a better appreciation and understanding of birds. I am much more aware of what birds do all day and when and where different species hang out. And I've learned a lot about how birds react to weather, rain or shine — something you don't notice as much on shorter outings. Big Days have made me a better birder. **M**

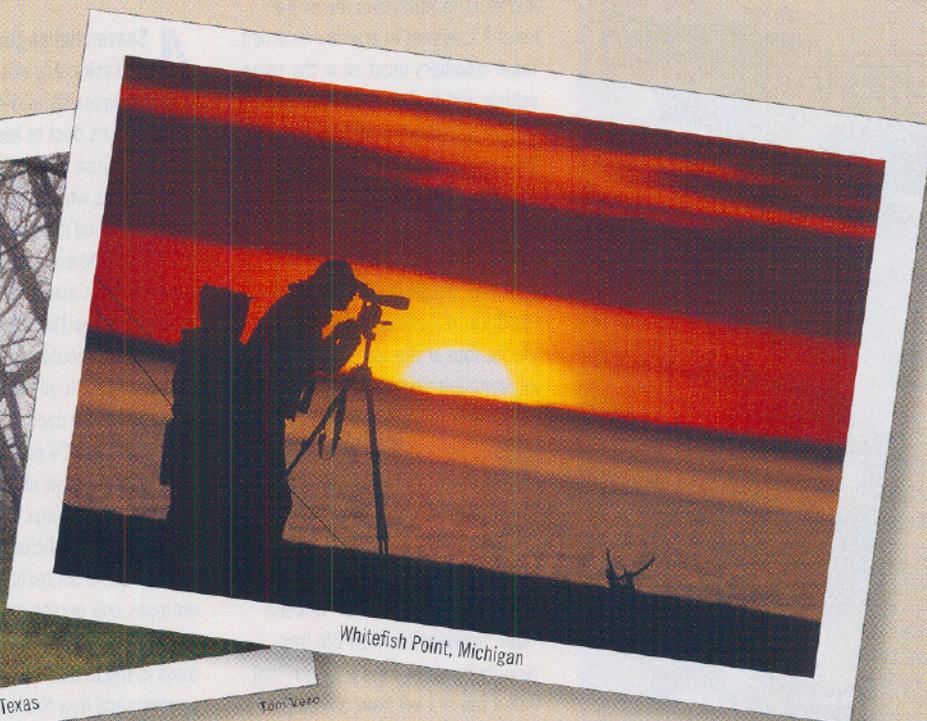
Biggest Big Days

Texas	258	Oklahoma	180
California	231	Wyoming	180
Wisconsin	230	Florida	179
New Jersey	229	South Carolina	179
Kansas	225	Maine	178
Oregon	216	Pennsylvania	178
Louisiana	209	Idaho	176
Missouri	208	Kentucky	176
Maryland	206	Mississippi	175
Ohio	205	Nebraska	175
Colorado	204	South Dakota	175
Iowa	204	Tennessee	174
Minnesota	204	New Hampshire	170
Michigan	203	Arkansas	168
Alabama	202	North Dakota	167
New York	202	Virginia	167
Utah	202	Massachusetts	162
Washington	201	Nevada	162
New Mexico	200	Rhode Island	159
Arizona	199	Vermont	159
Delaware	199	West Virginia	140
Montana	192	D.C.	134
Georgia	190	Alaska	110
Indiana	188	Hawaii	59
Connecticut	186		
Illinois	184		
North Carolina	184		

Source: American Birding Association



Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, Texas



Whitefish Point, Michigan

Tom Vezo

Larry Dech

10 STEPS TO BREAKING A

BIG DAY

1 Select a clear goal. Why are you doing it? To spend a day with your birding buddies? To learn more about the birds around you? To break a record? Selecting a goal will help you decide what kind of Big Day experience to plan.

2 Learn the rules. The American Birding Association lists Big Day rules and ethics along with champions and records on its website at www.americanbirding.org/bigday.

The rules are straightforward: Identify as many bird species as possible during a single calendar day in any geographic area, using any means of travel, and have all members of your team identify at least 95 percent of species recorded. Team members must be in the same vehicle and in direct voice contact, and outside help is not allowed. Only full species as indicated by the current ABA Checklist and Supplements may be counted.

While pursuing a Big Day, the ABA also suggests that you follow the Code of Birding Ethics and put the welfare of the birds and their environment first — staying back from nests and sensitive areas, limiting the use of artificial light and recordings, and avoiding actions that might stress birds.

3 Pick a record that looks beatable. The ABA website provides monthly Big Day records by state. Find a month that either doesn't yet have a record or

has a record that is easy to break. If your state doesn't have a monthly record that seems especially low compared with other months, use a more scientific method to see which records are beatable:

Gather checklists of birds in your area, go through them, and add up the species that you might reasonably expect to find in a day in any given month. Then compare your total against the monthly record. If you think you can find more species than the record, go for it! Once you've broken a Big Day monthly record or two, you might attempt the greater challenge of besting the all-time record for your state.

4 Share challenges, divvy up tasks. Any number of participants may constitute a team, but it's best to keep your team lean and mean. Invite one or more other birders who share your vision and make good companions. It's fine to have a difference in skill level between team members, but the smaller the gap the better. Everyone on the team should be equally challenged, with all team members identifying each of the birds independently. It's no fun for one person to point out all the birds while the others are always trying to catch up. To increase efficiency, assign tasks to different team members. For example, one person might scope the water while another scans the sky for birds in flight. Make sure everybody understands how the team will make decisions during the Big Day.

5 Figure out what your target birds sound like. This is a must, as many species will have to be identified by sound. A good knowledge of bird vocalizations improves the team's efficiency, as it is easier to hear most birds than to see them. The key is to learn the songs of species you're likely to encounter along the route. The best way to do that is through experience. Go birding along the planned route in the weeks before your Big Day, and figure out which birds are making which sounds.

6 Minimize travel and maximize variety. Spend as much time birding your area as possible, then set a Big Day date and plan a route that is likely to hit the widest variety of bird species with the least travel time. Aim to maximize species variety by maximizing the types of habitats you encounter. Go to ponds and lakes for waterfowl, mudflats for shorebirds, woodlands for songbirds, and farm fields for open-area birds. Diversity is the key.

Also, be sure to get to each habitat at the times when the birds are most active. Go for the owls at night, visit wetlands and grasslands before sunrise, hit woodland areas in the early morning when songbirds are still singing, and search for waterfowl later in the day when other birds are inactive. Planning the route is fun for all members of the team and should be based on your own experiences.

RECORD

7 Make a dry run (or two). Don't underestimate the value of scouting. Experienced Big Day birders spend days or weeks searching the areas they plan to visit for specific birds, finding nests and other stakeouts that can be relocated during the actual event, then making route adjustments based on their scouting reports. This method increases the chances of finding the scouted birds, leaving more time to spend on other birds throughout the Big Day. I recommend making an abbreviated dry run before the actual Big Day to test drive times, logistics, and bird activity.

8 Plan to be flexible. Sleep well before your Big Day, make a species checklist, collect the necessary maps, and pack enough food and water to last through the day. Keep a running total on your Big Day, updated throughout the day, so you know where you are relative to your goal and can readily see which species you're lacking. Make sure you're ready for emergencies — tires always seem to go flat on Big Days.

9 Start early, keep moving, and have fun. You don't have to start at midnight, but get going early enough to locate the night birds. Keep moving throughout the day. Don't get stuck looking for a particular species. You will probably miss a few common ones and stumble upon a few unexpected bonuses. Concentrate on finding uncommon birds — the common ones

should fall into place, and the rare birds, unless you've got them staked out, are just too unpredictable. By late afternoon, go over your list. If you have most of the species from one habitat but are missing some birds in another habitat, make route changes to fill in the gaps.

10 Bask in the glory. First get some sleep. But then share the experience with your friends, post a Big Day report on the Internet, and submit an official ABA Big Day report form (available on the ABA website). If you break a record, write a few paragraphs for the local newspaper and TV stations. You will raise awareness of birding in your area and help promote conservation efforts, and you'll have fun. We generated some ink in our tiny weekly newspaper (circulation 1,001) for our record-breaking effort and, for a minute, felt like real celebrities.

Noah Strycker, 19, is studying fisheries/wildlife and fine arts at Oregon State University in Corvallis. His articles, photos, and artwork have appeared in regional and national birding publications. In 2004, he was named best photographer in the American Birding Association's Young Birder of the Year competition.

For More Information

World Series of Birding

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www.worldseriesofbirding.org
sheila.lego@njaudubon.org
(609) 884-2736

Great Texas Birding Classic

Texas Parks and Wildlife and Gulf Coast Bird Observatory
www.tpwd.state.tx.us/gtbc
gtbc@tpwd.state.tx.us
(866) 482-2527

Birdathon!

National Audubon Society
www.audubon.org/bird/birdathon/
birdathon@audubon.org
(800) 647-BIRD (2473)

Big Sit!

New Haven Bird Club and Bird Watcher's Digest
www.birdwatchersdigest.com/site/funbirds/bigsit/bigsit.aspx
bigsit@birdwatchersdigest.com
(740) 373-5285

North American Birdwatching Open

Audubon International
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(518) 767-9051, extension 12