

Blueprint for a New Jersey “Big Day”

by Pete Dunne



Twenty-six years ago, I thought that a Big Day – a 24-hour birding marathon – was a frivolous exercise. I couldn't see why something that was as fun as birding needed to be turned into a game.

Then, with the goal of raising money for New Jersey Audubon, I did a Big Day...and I was **hooked** – lock, stock, and binocular barrel. I discovered that not only was doing a Big Day exciting, it was a celebration of New Jersey's natural riches.

Every year since 1984, the World Series of Birding has given me an excuse to spend hours in the field, scouting, and growing familiar with the nuances of the state. It has improved my birding skills and brought me to some higher understanding of Big Day strategy.

If you are about to engage in your first World Series of Birding, you don't need to read this article to see a bunch of birds. Just garner your pledges from co-workers and friends on the birds you hope to see. Get up early on B-Day. Head out to your favorite birding patch. Start counting.

But, if you want to maximize your time in the field and gather all the avian riches the Garden State has to offer, and **raise lots of money for the cause of your choice (including New Jersey Audubon)**, then you are going to need a plan. Here are my suggestions, a blueprint for a New Jersey Big Day, (offered by one World Series birder to another).

1. PICK YOUR TEAM MATES WITH CARE

The most important consideration on any Big Day is choosing the person or persons you are going to share it with.

Sure, you can go it alone, but Big Day's go better with chums.

Your team mates should be people who are as serious (or as frivolous) about birding as you are. People who don't mind sitting ham to ham in a back seat of a car for hours on end. Team mates who make light of having bags of potato chips upended in their laps. Team mates who won't start every conversation after 8:00 AM with *"I told you we should have..."*

In other words, what you want is a cadre of cheerful, enthusiastic, Teflon coated Ghandi's in your quorum.

What's a quorum? Three to four seems to be about right. Fewer than this and birds get missed. More than this and it becomes increasingly difficult getting all team members onto a bird.

It is also difficult getting more than four individuals into a car after all the food is stowed.

If you have one or more friends that you already bird with, you have the nucleus of a team. If you want to add one or more individuals, consider drafting somebody whose skill levels compliment the team, or somebody who can add a geographic edge (i.e., someone who is intimate with some bird rich hotspots in a part of the state you are not familiar with).

2. ROUTE

Critical to any Big Day is route — a set of key birding points linked by a line. Central to your route is your selection of sites. They should be chosen to incorporate a diversity of habitats along the shortest possible line.

Why a diversity of habitats? Because different bird species choose to be in different habitats.

In New Jersey, these key habitats

include: Canadian Zone woodlands, Hemlock groves, Spruce/White Pine plantings, freshwater marshes, Northern deciduous forest, grasslands, Southern hardwood swamps, pine barrens, estuaries and tidal marshes, barrier beach, ocean, and bay.

P.S. Don't forget a migrant trap (forested pockets, hemmed in by water or urban environs that attract migrants). In fact, if you can, incorporate two traps (the more space between them, the better). It often happens that migratory fallouts blanket one part of the state and totally miss another.

3. TIME AND PLACE(S)

The shortest distance between points is a straight line. The shorter the line, the more time you can spend birding and the less time driving.

If George Orwell were to summarize, he might say "BIRD TIME GOOD. TRAVEL TIME, BAD."

Pick stops with care. If you plot a good, fundamental route – one that links key habitats along major roadways – you won't have to go miles out of your way to pick up a needed bird or two. A route that needs to be subsidized with 10-minute detours is not a good route.

By and large, no single bird is worth more than 10-minutes effort during prime birding time; 20-minutes in the middle

Get hooked...
lock,
stock,
and
binocular
barrel.

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of the day. If you decide you must take a side trip, try and make it worth the effort. Try and locate two or more needed birds at your destination or one on the way to that site.

REMEMBER. You have 24-hours. It's not a lot of time to map a state. It goes without saying that your route will be closely linked to a schedule – a time table – that balances bird time and travel time.

Even veteran teams with well-defined routes find it difficult to stay on schedule. There is a big temptation to spend “just a few more minutes” looking for JUST THAT BIRD.

DON'T! The way to add species to your list is to add habitats. The way to really chop species off your list is to have to cut habitats at the end of your day because you ran out of time.

Some teams do full or partial dry runs of their routes before the Big Day, keeping schedules that are down to the **minute**. Other teams are more flexible but still plot schedules that incorporate time allotted for birding and the time it will take to get from one point to another.

One thing you might want to do in planning your Big Day is leave an hour buffer. It's great insurance when you are running late (which you almost certainly will) and (in case you are on schedule) it gives you the flexibility to cash in on some unexpected opportunity (like a major migratory fallout) or to chase down misses on your list at the end of the day.

4. NOT ALL BIRDS ARE EQUAL

All birds count as one on a Big Day, but uncounted birds count zero. Some species, owing to reduced numbers, or restricted distributions, or their secretive nature, are harder to find than others.

A key consideration in the selection of birding sites is not only the total number of birds you will find, but the number of hard to get species that occur there. Examples include Hermit Thrush, Cerulean Warbler, Purple Finch (Canadian Zone woodland breeders),

Yellow-throated Warbler, and Summer Tanager (Southern Pine forests).

Pick your sites. Make a shopping list of species you expect to find there. **BOLD FACE those birds that are must gets!** Keep your list up as you move from site to site. This way, if you are missing a key species after leaving a site, you'll have time to do something about it.

I remember one Big Day when our team got to South Jersey **before** we discovered that we'd missed Swamp Sparrow. Easy to find in Northern marshes, Swamp Sparrows are all but absent in the South in mid-May.

5. BACK UP!

Hard to get species are just that. You will discover that Kingfishers that always sit on “that” island will be sitting somewhere else on the day of the World Series of Birding. Don't trust to chance. For all uncommon, or fickle, or difficult to find species, pinpoint two or three (or four, or five) back up locations along your route.

How do you know where to find back up birds along your route? Easy. You go...

6. SCOUTING

This may be the best part of the World Series of Birding. In the days (even weeks) ahead of the event, go out to prospective birding sites and check out prospective little pockets along your route. “Tie Down” birds on territory (like Pileated Woodpecker and Warbling Vireo) and check out lakes and reservoirs for lingering waterfowl.

Many people harbor a misapprehension regarding Big Days. A Big Day is not for finding birds. A Big Day is for scooping up birds that are already found – the birds you

found during your hours of scouting.

By and large, the most productive scouting will be had the week leading up to the event. That is when most resident species will be on territory; this is when lingering birds stand the best chance of sticking for the Big Day.

Earlier scouting (before the leaves are on the trees) will help you pinpoint territorial birds of prey. But the closer you are to the Big Day, the more your scouting efforts will pay off **particularly** for migrants.

Migrants are fickle and opportunistic. They go where the food goes and insect rich pockets change year to year. That's the bad news. The good news is that when a pocket is found, it usually remains productive. Birds that have found an insect rich belt of flowering oak trees linger. New arrivals, seeing all the feeding activity, drop in and stay.

My suggestion – three to five days before the Big Day, check out breeding sites and tie down hard-to-get species. Two to three days before the event, check out lakes, and ponds, and bays, and channels for lingering water birds (then keep your fingers crossed that they stick).

7. BASIC GAME PLAN

FULL STATE will always be a work in progress. Back in the 1920's, when Charles Urner was plotting and scheming the ultimate route, a Big Day might start at Troy Meadows for rails and bitterns, move on to the hills above Boonton for warblers, then on to the Watchung Ridge...the Elizabeth Marshes...Manahawkin...maybe even Holgate! The day was long – 4:00 AM to dusk. Today, teams routinely travel the length of the state – from High Point to Cape May Point and go 24-hours.

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Increasingly popular is **COUNTY ONLY**. These “Limited Geographic Area” efforts hinge on a birder’s intimacy with the local turf. The prize is a big species total but the challenge lies in comparing your Big Day total to the established “Par” – the total number of species likely to occur in your county in mid-May.

Whether you do a full state run, or an LGA, there is a basic strategy to a Big Day, and it is linked to activity patterns of birds. My plan is:

- Midnight to 4:00 AM: one or two fresh-water marshes for rails and bitterns. Add wood lots that are known to hold owls.
- 4:00 AM to 5:30 AM: **either** plop yourself someplace that offers a mix of habitat and a good view of the sky (to see and **hear** birds that are migrating overhead or moving at first light) or travel between two or three places in close proximity where very desirable “stake out birds” are to be found.
- IF IT IS CLOUDY, DAYBREAK COMES LATER. DON’T PUT YOURSELF BEHIND THE 8-BALL IMMEDIATELY BY CONDUCTING THE FIRST HALF HOUR OF YOUR “DAYLIGHT” ROUTE IN THE DARK (BEFORE BIRDS ARE UP AND CALLING).
- 5:30 AM to 10:00 AM: Peak birding time for songbirds. Most of your birds will be found during this period – particularly migrants – because this is when they are most active and most vocal. Hit as many different habitats and scoop up as many difficult species as possible.
- Between 9:30 AM and 10:15 AM: Plan a 5-minute scan for raptors. Thermal production is optimal. Birds of prey are just getting up. Find some key vantage point and scan for nesting species engaging in territorial display and migrants on the move.

- 10:15 AM to 5:00 PM: Travel and birding at geographically divergent spots. Link lakes, marshes, woodlands, grasslands, beaches, ocean, bay...every possible habitat to be found.
- 5:00 PM to Dusk: Mopping up. Use this time to track down key staked out birds and to clean up your list – searching for birds missed earlier.
- Dusk to 11:55 PM (you have to be at Finish Line by Midnight): Back to listening again – for birds that vocalize at night that you missed earlier.

8. KEY SITES

New Jersey is a well birded state. Here are some key sites, grouped by habitat, that command themselves to Big Day birders.

Northern Forest

Delaware Water Gap NRA
Stokes State Forest / High Point
Newark Watershed

Northern Deciduous Woodlands

Jocky Hollow, Morris County
NJAS Scherman-Hoffman Sanctuary
Great Swamp, Somerset County
Watchung Reservation, Somerset County
Sourland Mountains, Mercer County

Southern Woodlands

Belleplain State Forest, Cape May County
Dividing Creek, Cumberland County

Migrant Traps

Culver Lake, Sussex County
Garret Mountain Reservation, Passaic County
NJAS Scherman-Hoffman Wildlife Sanctuary
Sandy Hook

Princeton Institute Woods
Parvin State Park
Cape May Point

Grasslands

Walkill National Wildlife Refuge, Sussex County
Alpha Grasslands, Hunterdon County
Hoffman Park, HCPS Hunterdon County
Atlantic City Airport
Woodstown (Featherbed Lane), Salem County

Freshwater Wetlands

Vernon Marshes, Sussex County
Troy Meadows, Morris County
Kearny Marsh, Hudson County
Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, Somerset County
Trenton Marsh, Mercer County
Mannington Marsh, Salem County
South Cape May Meadows

Tidal Estuary

Hackensack Meadowlands
Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge (Brigantine)
Cape May County
Cumberland County

That’s it. All you need to know to plot your Big Day. If it seems too much to contemplate, just remember this. The real purpose to a Big Day is having fun. Keep this in mind, and success is assured. ■