

A 300 SPECIES NEW YORK STATE YEAR LIST: MY FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY ODYSSEY

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Early in 1992 during a telephone conversation with Richard Guthrie, I mentioned that on 22 July I would celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of my first day of birding, and I thought that I ought to do something special to commemorate the occasion. Guthrie suggested trying to see 300 species in New York State in one year. I countered that sounded like more than I could handle. It can be done, he said, and I responded that since my New York list was only 308 species, I would have to see almost every species I'd ever seen in the State to do it. He said to think about it and I said I would, noting to myself that it was highly unlikely. But when Stan Lincoln called in mid February to tell me about a Lark Sparrow just across the river, I went the next morning to find it. "Just in case," I told myself. I did much more birding than usual in the first half of the year but more in the line of celebrating the anniversary than in believing I could find 300 species in a year. I wasn't convinced I could do it until the end of June when my tally showed 253. Blanks on my checklist showed me what I needed and what I had to do to get them.

Blanks on the checklist also showed me the first rule in going for a big year: start on 1 January, not 1 July! During the spring I had missed several species that appeared at Jamaica Bay because I had waited several days before going after them. By the time I got there they had left. One species, a Ruff, spent several days at the refuge and was seen on the morning I got there, but earlier, and it wasn't seen again. After 30 June when I heard about a bird, I left to find it the next morning, if not the same day. Thus, the summer was spent traveling around the state to fill the blanks on my checklist. To Watertown for White-winged Tern, to Ithaca for Dickcissel, to Long Island for Black Skimmer and the salt-marsh sparrows, to Rochester for Clay-colored Sparrow, and repeatedly to Cedar Beach on Long Island for missing sandpipers.

Another must is to establish a statewide network of birders who quickly pass the news of needed species and who will relay the information to you. Almost all birders will help in whatever way they can. Bill Lee and Andy Baldelli, the most frequent callers, invested a considerable amount of time and added significantly to their phone bills with numerous long distance calls, never hesitating to get me early advice on possible additions to my list. I've known Bill for many years, but I met Andy at Cedar Beach while searching for a Rufous-necked

Stint. He told me that he had seen it, just a few days earlier, on the exact spot that he was standing. I asked him to step aside if he was still standing on it so I could add it to my list. I also chastised him for seeing, at his young age, a bird that I had never seen in 50 years of active birding! From that casual meeting came my best advisor! He'd call with weekly reports even noting when necessary that there was nothing around worth reporting. Most birders were like that. Only a very few are not interested in another's birding adventures and decline to proffer information on what's about. I make that comment not in complaint but rather in wonderment that so many birders are so willing to be of help.

Two more necessities are a car in good condition and a mind and body in reasonable condition. In January, I had a problem in my car that ended with a new starter, battery and alternator and the alternator trouble light *still* shining. Every time I left home, particularly on the 1000+ mile trips, I wondered if my car would make it and hoped, fervently, that if the breakdown was to come it would be on the way home after seeing the bird I was seeking. My car now has 141,000 miles, including the more than 25,000 birding miles added in 1992, and is still chugging along...with the alternator light still lit!

Body condition is another thing. My task would have been a lot easier, and probably somewhat more successful, if I had done it thirty years ago when my hearing (particularly), eyesight and general stamina were in better shape.

Another problem is that this endeavor took a lot of time and demanded instant availability. I'm retired so that wasn't a problem but thirty years ago it would have been. For a younger aspirant you need either to be an heir or an heiress to a year's sustenance and transportation or a salesperson with a New York State territory.

Attitude is equally important. I spent uncounted hours alone in my car. If you can't amuse yourself, don't even try this without a constant companion. For many of my downstate trips I birded with Mike Lolya, who added a lot of comfort (and good hearing) to those trips. Unfortunately, Mike couldn't always come so there were trips taken alone, including some as long as five days, with only myself to talk to. Those who know my radical views on almost everything probably think that leaving me to talk to myself for even a day, much less five, is indeed dangerous to the world!

There's yet another rule to mention. Don't wait for the last days of the year to finish up. I planned a trip to the St. Lawrence River for two days and then to Montauk for the last week of the year. I was immobilized in Albany by an ice storm so I headed to Long Island for the year's end. I was foiled again. Rain and fog covered the island for

the last days of the year. But the fog lifted late in the afternoon of 31 December and I added Eared Grebe to the list. With that species my fiftieth year list was at 306! I saw 21 speices in New York State for the first time (Table 1), two of which also were first State records. The magic number of 300 had been reached on October 29 with a Gray Kingbird, a vagrant visitor to Rennselear County. I was tipped off to it by a call from Rich Guthrie. Thus the goal had been reached with the help of the same person who had suggested the quest. But of my total list, only ten species were added in the last quarter of the year (Table 2).

I'm very content that I did it. It took a lot of time, too much of it lonely driving. It took a lot of money. At times it took too much energy. One night having just driven four hours from Endicott through driving rain and at the end of a 1500 mile, four day grind, my wife greeted me with "you just missed Bill Lee, he called ten minutes ago." My response was that if he was calling about a bird, it had better be one in our back yard believing that was as far as I could get without a few days rest. Fortunately, it was a White-winged Tern advisory and one of the stops that I had just made. Bill had called so many friends about it he forgot that he had called me several days earlier!

There are regrets about missed birds. I spent a dozen hours or more poking along Adirondack roads listening for a Northern Saw-whet Owl. And my approximate count was 36 hours at Moose River Plains and at the Nature Conservancy's Kendall property looking for a Spruce Grouse. Least Bittern, I discovered too late, was nesting along the Hudson River not 30 miles from home! I went for a singing Kentucky Warbler in Westchester County just days after it had stopped singing. I missed perhaps fifteen species seen by others during the year in New York, some not for lack of trying, some by finding out about them too late, and some because they just passed by in migration and didn't stay long enough for me to hear about. I missed a visiting American White Pelican at Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge by one day!

But, I now believe that 320 species could be found in this State in a year. All it would take is inexhaustible dedication, time and money, following the advice above, and, as with me, a lot of good luck.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As in most birding articles some credits are due. First of all some family tributes. Like a very understanding and helpful wife. She is not birder and those who are married to non-birders know what that means. At least I was a birder a decade before we were married so she knew what she was in for. A son's house in Albany and a daughter's in

Geneva provided lodging on many nights upstate. Richard Guthrie, of course, has to be mentioned, since his call started the whole thing. But I screamed at him when I found out that he had neglected to tell me about a Yellow-headed Blackbird but had convinced me to bird out of state for a day to get a life Boreal Owl. Stan Lincoln continued to help and on one occasion found a coin phone to call me from Staten Island and tell me about the State's first Roseate Spoonbill. In addition to those mentioned above and earlier, Charlie Rouse from Geneva and Ed Treacy from Orange County helped out, and Gary Lee from Hamilton County was vital to my Adirondack list. Trips to Letchworth State Park, the Adirondacks, and Niagara Falls with the Hudson-Mohawk Bird Club added numerous species. Long Island was essential and there Manny Levine helped out time and again. He promised Seaside Sparrow in return for this article but visits to known sites such as the Oceanside Nature Preserve and Cow Meadow Park in Freeport were unproductive. However, the trip did produce my only Gull-billed Tern for the year. I found Seaside Sparrow later and Manny, as is obvious, got the article anyway.

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Table 1. Additions To My New York State List in 1992.

Eared Grebe	Pomarine Jaeger
Brown Pelican	White-winged Tern
Roseate Spoonbill	Gull-billed Tern
Tufted Duck	Acadian Flycatcher
Black Vulture	Gray Kingbird
Yellow Rail	Gray Jay
King Rail	Protonotary Warbler
Spotted Redshank	Summer Tanager
Red-necked Phalarope	Lark Sparrow
Red Phalarope	Western Meadowlark
Parasitic Jaeger	

Table 2. 1992 Fourth Quarter Additions

Eared Grebe	Purple Sandpiper
Tundra Swan	Barn Owl
Yellow Rail	Great Horned Owl
King Rail	Gray Kingbird
Spotted Redshank	American Pipit
Hudsonian Godwit	Lapland Longspur