

The following article about Lenoir's Big Sit that was originally published in the Sept/Oct 2017 issue of *Bird Watchers Digest* magazine.

I Sat Through the Big Sit

by
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As a veteran backyard bird watcher I've already seen most of the common species that frequent my backyard. But I'm always hoping to see new species. Friends tell me there are only two ways to do that. The first is to spend more time actually looking for birds. The second is to go beyond my backyard and the local park to new locations with a variety of habitats that attract specific birds. They also suggested I join them for a "big day" – one day when they spend the entire day birding and visiting all the best sites in the area. They see more birds on their big day than I see in a full year. But I don't think a big day is for me.

My idea of birding is to sit at my kitchen window sipping a cup of coffee and watching a chickadee grab a sunflower seed at my feeder. When I want to do some more serious birdwatching, I may skip the coffee. That's my style of birding.

Big days are just the opposite. They appeal to fanatics. Teams of birders compete to see which team will see the greatest number of species that day. Some teams begin at midnight listening for owls and continue all day until the following midnight. Non-stop, all day birding. It stands to reason that such focused birding activity will result in seeing a large number of species. But for some people it can become more about amassing checkmarks than in enjoying the birds and the day.

For some a big day competition is just that – all-out competition. One of the oldest and best known big day event is New Jersey Audubon's "World Series of Birding" which attracts over 60 top competitive teams and many less-competitive teams. Each team consists of 4-5

birders. Their goal is to see and identify the greatest number of species they can anywhere within the state of New Jersey on a single day. The winning team usually tallies over 220 species in the 24-hour event which mathematically works out to one new species every 8 minutes for 24 straight hours. Now that is serious birding.

In order to achieve such lofty numbers the top teams carefully plan their day in advance. Weeks before the actual day they scout likely areas hoping to stake out rare species that other teams may miss. They create computer models to plot their most productive itinerary and best routes to follow. Speed is critical. They can't spend much time searching for each species. In addition to time spent spotting the birds they may drive 3-400 miles just getting to the most productive spots. There isn't much time to actually enjoy the birds. They are merely collecting checkmarks.

Such manic behavior seems excessive for all but the most elite teams who have a chance to win. Other teams try to make the day less intimidating. For example, one team birds only within Cape May County rather than racing around the entire state of New Jersey. Others bird in even more limited areas. One spends the entire days within the Cape May city limits. Another team does all its birding by bicycle. One team with a large number of members rents a city bus to leisurely chaffer them to various local hot spots

Even with such self-imposed limitations, these non-conventional teams manage to rack up bird totals that I envy. However, even with these milder, pared-back efforts, a big day still seem too imposing for me. I prefer something even more sedate.

Friends tell me that another event, The Big Sit, seems like the perfect activity for me. Like a big day, the idea behind the big sit is see a lot of birds within a single day. Always scheduled for the first weekend in October, about 100 teams from around the country vie to produce longest bird list and the championship prize (which is only bragging rights). It is definitely more relaxed than a typical big day and adds a strong social element as well. The concept is simple. First, you find a local natural area that offers a variety of habitats - meadows, ponds, streams, trees, shrubs - that should attract a variety of species. Next, lay out a 17-foot diameter circle. The objective is to count all the species that the team sees or hears from within

that circle during the day. No frantic driving here and there. Just stay put in one spot all day. Simple.

You don't need a surveyor to layout your circle and outline it with white chalk like a baseball diamond. Although, I'm told that once on the eve of our team's first Big Sit they outlined the circle using bird seed hoping to attract birds. To me that seems like stretching the rules. Moreover, it didn't work. Mice and chipmunks ate all the seed.

Of course, you would not expect anyone to stand in the circle all day. So standard equipment includes lawn chairs, hammocks, blankets and other creature comforts. Ice chests, picnic coolers, insulated bags are also common. Food is a necessity. There are unconfirmed rumors that some teams equip their circle with BBQ grills, televisions and WiFi access.

I reluctantly agreed to participate in my first Big Sit last year. Our circle is located on the back lawn of an old unoccupied 1870 mansion, now a county park. It sits atop a hill with meadows sloping down to the Hudson River. When leaves drop from riverside trees we had an unobstructed 2-mile view due west across the river to the New Jersey palisades. Tall trees border our view to the south. To the north, a butterfly and hummingbird garden attracts nectar loving birds and the foundation plantings around the old mansion teem with backyard birds. Migrating hawks navigate down the river and four bird feeders filled to brim are effective lures. It seems like a good location. In previous years the Big Sit team usually saw or heard over 50 species, with a record high of 67 species. Naturally we hoped to break the record.

When the big day arrived (or more accurately, the Big Sit day) I was still ambivalent, not convinced I would enjoy it. I warned our team that I didn't know how much time I would actually be able to spend at the sit. That was my excuse in case I was bored and wanted to leave early during the day. Two of the more serious team members arrived at our circle before sunrise to listen for owls. I didn't. I strolled in mid-morning with a thermos of coffee and a bag of donuts and was warmly welcomed. Other members popped in and out on no predictable schedule. Some stayed briefly only to leave and then return again in the afternoon. The composition of the team was fluid. The first few hours passed quickly due both to the newness of the activity and to the steady addition of new species to our list. Lunch was a high point as we sampled the variety of cuisine carried in by members. Then after-lunch doldrums set in and only

occasionally did we add a new bird to our list. In between birds, the conversation covered the gamut. I learned what was currently on sale at the local grocery. How John's recovery from surgery was going. That pro scouts were watching the quarterback on the local college team. We debated locations for our Christmas lunch and the best new TV programs. Oh, and then another new bird flew over.

As mid-afternoon turned into late afternoon our bird list had stopped growing. In truth, it wasn't an exceptionally long list. Although it was longer than my yard list for the full year so far. I was beginning to tire. Not from over exertion. No, it was more like the pleasant relaxation you feel after spending quality time outdoors with friends.

The core of our team packed it in maybe an hour before the sunset. We adjourned to a local establishment for a final review of the day and to examine our bird list. That exam revealed that we had missed one of the most common species – a rock pigeon. We missed the common urban pigeon. How could that be? There were always pigeons around the old mansion. Did we miss it? Or did we just forget to check it off? No one remembered actually seeing one. So we rushed back to our 17-foot circle determined to add that pigeon to our list. It would bring our total number of species to one more than last year.

But darkness spread without a single pigeon stirring. So, no new record this year. As we walked back to our cars, I wasn't disappointed. I sat through the entire Big Sit (well, most of it), added some new species, reconnected with old and new friends, and found an event to look forward to again next year.

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