

AN HOUR ON THE TOWER

And other bird-watching games

For whatever the reason I've always enjoyed playing games, and this has carried over into my birding. My friends and I even make a competitive sport out of the Christmas Bird Count. Our team does its best to see more species than any other. Occasionally, just for fun, we play tricks on other groups within the circle. One time I carved a common murre—a bird never seen hereabouts—out of a duck decoy, and a friend and I placed it in a lake within the territory. We did this in late December, when the temperature was in the low teens. As we paddled our canoe out into the lake, a strong wind developed. With this came whitecaps. We dropped the decoy and its leaded weight overboard, and headed for shore. Then a paddle broke. We spelled each other paddling, and it took an hour or more to reach shore. The worst of it was that the team we wanted to fool never saw the bird.

I suppose the biggest bird game I've participated in has been New

Jersey Audubon's World Series of Birding. This has been a lot of fun for my friends and me, but of course we never win. Another more recent and sedentary birding contest we've been part of is the Big Sit! This is sponsored by *Bird Watcher's Digest*, the New Haven Bird Club, and Swarovski Optik and is held on a Sunday in mid-October. Here, birders throughout the world see how many birds they can see from one spot in one day. Our spot is the Pirie Platform at the Celery Farm Natural Area in Allendale, New Jersey. Our nemesis Big Sit! bird is the eastern screech-owl. Each year I arrive at the platform in darkness in the hope of hearing its whinny. We—members of the Fyke Nature Association and I—know the bird can usually be found somewhere near the platform, and that it will generally respond to my imitation of its call. Many people, especially my wife Lilly, think it's the best rendition of a screech-owl call. But on Big Sit! day it never answers.

I learned the secret to imitating



TOM VEZO

**Eastern screech-owl,
rufous morph.** 📷

solved with the advent of what is now known as An Hour on the Tower (HOT). In 1990 my friends Charlie Mayhood, Gordon Schulze, and I aroused ourselves from the summer birding doldrums, and stationed ourselves every Sunday at the Pirie Platform. We then counted the bird species seen or heard within an hour's time. In looking

through the records, I find that the fewest birds seen in an hour was fifteen. This was September 22, 1996. The most recorded was on September 9, 1990, when the three of us saw 42 species, including common moorhen, eastern screech-owl, which readily responded to my imitation, and bobolink. On another HOT session that year, Charlie and I saw a peregrine falcon fly in and catch a green-winged teal in the air. The peregrine flew about 500 feet with the teal and then, for some unknown reason, dropped it.

Fortunately, HOT has caught the fancy of younger birders hereabouts and now the tower is crowded with participants beginning in late July to

an eastern screech-owl in the *Audubon Bird Guide*, the author of which is the great ornithologist and conservationist Richard H. Pough. Once you get the hang of it you'll be able to call in owls by night and songbirds by day—they just can't pass up the chance to mob an owl. Pough describes how to do it this way: "Blow air out in a low whistle through saliva cupped on the fore part of your tongue. If you throw your head back slightly the air bubbling through the saliva will produce the characteristic quavering call."

The above competitions are one-day events. What is a competitive birder to do the rest of the year? For local birders this problem was

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early November. Although the event's originators' hearing, eyesight, and testosterone levels have diminished, count numbers have not. This is because of the extraordinary talents of these new people and because of *their* superior eyesight, hearing, and—I must admit—birding abilities. However, in spite of this, they have not been able to break the 42-bird barrier. They're beginning to get close, though. Just this past October they hit 41. The game's only rule is that each bird listed must be seen or heard by at least two participants.

Since HOT's inception, 122 birds—some quite uncommon—have been listed during 89 one-hour stints. One day in 2001 a young woman named Kerul Kassel was scoping the marsh when an adult purple gallinule flew into view. It remained at the sanctuary for several weeks and people came from all around to see it. Another good prize was the great cormorant that

appeared out of the blue in 1997. It remained for weeks.

Some locally common birds are often missed. One that comes to mind is the rock pigeon. It's highly sought after during the hour. One October day a few years back, everyone participating in HOT was treated to a rare sight—something even the most diehard birders haven't seen. A rock pigeon circled the lake and, to our surprise, landed in the water and started drinking. I had seen this once before, and my friend Rob Fanning had seen two rock pigeons land in the water at the Celery Farm. David Sibley, in *The Sibley Guide to Bird Life & Behavior*, tells of the need of pigeons and doves to consume more water than other birds. Perhaps this is because more fluids are needed to produce the "milk" they feed their young. Nevertheless, when pigeons land on water the tail is pointed upward, much like a ruddy duck. As you may know, pigeons drink by sucking the

water up, not by tilting the head back and letting the water run down. Therefore, a pigeon can land on water, drink quickly, and fly off before its feathers become saturated.

You too can have your own HOT at your favorite birding spot. You'll be surprised how many species you'll see during an hour's watch. Here are a couple of tips to help add to your list.

- *Take note of what birds are watching in the sky.* If a bird glances up, there's something there—usually a hawk. Doves, waterfowl, and shorebirds "lock on" to any winged predator above, no matter how high, and keep it in their gaze. Other birds take a quick glance at circling raptors. Just notice where they've looked and you'll find it.

- *Listen carefully.* Almost every bird—even a domestic chicken—gives a distinctive note when a hawk is sighted. Learn these if you can. Crows utter a peculiar bark

when they see a buteo and have a different growling call when disturbed by an accipiter. House sparrows sound a continuous *chee chee, chee chee, chee chee* when a sharpshinned or Cooper's hawk is nearby. Many songbirds emit a high whining sound to warn other birds of the presence of a winged predator. Not so the blue jay—its quick, sharp *jay! jay!* sends other birds flying for cover.

- *Here's a tip for people who don't wear eyeglasses* when birding: Roll your binocular eye cups back the way bespectacled bird watchers do. This will noticeably increase the field of view. This is comfortable only with some models, but give it a try and see how it works for you. Believe me, you'll thank me if it does. *A*

Stiles Thomas is marsh warden for the Celery Farm Natural Area, a 107-acre park in Allendale, New Jersey.

As the price of fuel hovers at an all time high, birding games that are "carbon neutral" or minimize the use of fossil fuels are becoming increasingly popular.

Dig Green Big Year

A Big Green Big Year (DGBY—pronounced *Blaby*)

is very simple: record a standard Big Year list with the restriction that you only count those species seen while walking or cycling from your home or place of work. No driving half-way across the state to chase a rarity is allowed. Many Bigby-ers decide whether they will record a Walkina Blaby or a

Self-Propelled (cycling, kayaking, roller-skating, etc.) Bigby at the time they begin their list.

Dig Sit!

Have a seat, watch the birds—it's just that simple. Begun in 1994 by the New Haven Bird Club, the 14th annual Big Sit! takes place on Sunday, October 12, 2008 but

you can hold your own private one at any time. Simply find a promising spot, draw a real or imaginary 17-foot diameter circle on the ground, and record all the birds seen from within it over a 24-hour period. The less traveling required to reach your circle's location, the greener your Big Sit! will be.

Green Hour on the Tower

An eco-friendly version of the Hour on the Tower can be undertaken by combining the HOT and Bigby ideas—simply find a location within walking or cycling distance from your home or place of work where you can spend an hour each week counting as many species as you can. A nearby overlook, office

window, or your own roof (if it's safe) will work quite well as a "tower."—John Riutta

More information:

DGBY:

www.sparrowworks.ca/bigby.html

The Big Sit!:

birdwatchersdigest.com/site/funbirds/bigsit/bigsit.aspx