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Considering a Semi-big Year

by Chet Meyers

I'm sure a number of readers have attempted, and may have successfully completed, a Big Year—seeing over 300 different species in our fine state in one calendar year. My first attempt was in 2007, and I failed. At some point toward the end, I was experiencing more frustration at driving hundreds of miles to see stake-out birds than I was having fun glimpsing them. The near-misses were the worst: that Northern Mockingbird in Rochester that had the gall to leave two hours before I arrived, and the for-sure Northern Hawk Owl in the Sax-Zim Bog that wasn't so sure. You get the picture, because all of you have been there—I ended 2007 with 286 species.

Since then, I have learned what it takes to complete a successful Big Year, and the list is rather daunting. According to my more fortunate friends, some items include: being ready to go on a chase at the drop of a hat, putting over 20,000 miles on the odometer, having up-to-date electronic capabilities, staying overnight at some less-than-supreme small motels in the hinterland, and (perhaps most importantly) lining up contacts and birding friends well in advance.

Given all the above, I've decided to set aside pursuing a Big Year of 300. Instead, I'll attempt a Semi-Big Year, with a goal of seeing 250 birds. I did just that last year, and ended on December 31, 2016 with 254 species.

Now, before you accuse me of being a wimp, I argue that 250 is an honorable, difficult, but much more realistic number of birds to encounter in a year.

Take a moment to look up MOU's present (2017) list of 316 regular species in Minnesota. Do you see some really tough birds on there? Some you've had problems with in the past? As an experiment, I contacted eight birders I consider very knowledgeable, mailed them the checklist, and asked each one to mark the 20 toughest birds in any given year. Interestingly, there was a fairly high degree of consensus.

Ten other species got mentioned by at least two or three of the eight birders.

So that leaves 21 really tough species and 10 difficult ones, for a total of 31 birds you'd be lucky to see without a lot of extra work and luck—31 birds you'd definitely need to find to hit a Big Year goal. However, if you're willing to consider a Semi-Big Year, you can take it easy with these 31 birds. If they show up near your home base, they're worth the chase. If not, there's no need to stress.

All 8 Agree	7 of 8	6 of 8	5 of 8
Little Blue Heron	Piping Plover	Clark's Grebe	Cinnamon Teal
American Three-toed Woodpecker	Smith's Longspur	Little Gull	Barrow's Goldeneye
Kentucky Warbler		Prairie Falcon	Whimbrel
Spotted Towhee		Boreal Owl	Red Knot
		Mountain Bluebird	Sabine's Gull
		Yellow-breasted Chat	Pacific Loon
		Western Tanager	Yellow-crowned Night-Heron
			Say's Phoebe

Next are the birds that are tough in terms of annual frequency, or that are only found commonly in a particular part of Minnesota for a limited time. My little experimental group of birders came up with another 34 birds for this category. Subtracting the extra-hard and the moderately-hard from the Big Year total of 300 gives us around 251—which is why I believe it’s a good marker for a Semi-Big Year. You’ll still have to work for it, but it won’t break your back.

So now that you’ve chosen an option, you need to have a tactical plan. Here are some of my suggestions for Semi-Big Year guidelines:

- Have fun. When the fun ceases you are working too hard. Limit chases to 50 miles from your home base.
- Don’t rely on others to always find birds for you. Have a couple of patches that you bird frequently and get to know really well. This will teach you about seasonal patterns.
- Plan three or four long-distance trips each year for birds not in your region. Consider attending a birding festival, like the Detroit Lakes festival in the spring. Go on birding trips with Audubon clubs or with Minnesota Birding Weekends with Kim Eckert. I’m sure you have your own must-visit spots. Some of mine include Big Stone Lake/Salt Lake for spring shorebirds, the Sax-Zim Bog for winter owls and finches, Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge for nature drives, and McGregor Marsh to find Yellow Rail and Nelson’s Sharp-tailed Sparrow.
- Learn bird calls. Most times of the year, you hear more birds than you see.
- Stay in touch with birding friends. Check eBird and MOU for postings.

If you’ve never considered doing a Big Year—being too afraid of the commitment involved—I hope my ideas will encourage you to pursue something a little less daunting and possibly a little more satisfying. Better still, team up with a fellow birder to share the joys and frustrations of finding 250 regular Minnesota birds.

Special thanks to Kim Eckert, Barb and Denny Martin, Craig Mandel, Alyssa DeRubeis, Bruce Fall, and Doug Kieser for their tough-bird estimates and Jim Williams and Steve Carlson for their feedback.



*Red-tailed Hawk
by Father Paul Kammen*

Thanks Bob!

Minnesota Birding would like to recognize Bob Janssen for his contributions to the furtherance of the mission of the MOU and his 55+ years working with the Bell Museum. He received a Lifetime Achievement Award at the MOU Paper Session this past December.



Denise Young, the Executive Director of the Bell Museum, and Robert Janssen

New MOU Members

- Joseph Alexander, *Rochester, MN*
- Melissa Allard, *Minneapolis, MN*
- Erin Amundson, *Minneapolis, MN*
- Lorraine Briddon, *Gull Lake, MN*
- Kathleen Fjelstul, *Maiden Rock, WI*
- Robert Foucault, *Minneapolis, MN*
- Constance Hall, *Lester Prairie, MN*
- Adam Herman, *Falcon Heights, MN*
- Judy Johnsen, *Grand Forks, ND*
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- LM Information Delivery, Inc., *Easton, PA*
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- Robert Seigfreid, *North Mankato, MN*
- Dwight Smith, *Hastings, MN*
- Sarah Taylor, *La Salle, MN*
- Christiann Walton, *Eden Prairie, MN*
- Peter York, *Savage, MN*

MOU Calendar



March / April 2017

ZUMBRO VALLEY AUDUBON

April 1: ZVAS Monthly Bird Walk

Details: Join us on a casual walk through Quarry Hill Park at 9 am. Bring binoculars if you have them—some are available to borrow from the nature center if you don't own a pair. Dress for the weather. Families and children are welcome. Walks lasts about an hour, but stay for any length of time. Event is free and open to the public—no registration required. Meet leaders Terry and Joyce Grier at the Quarry Hill Nature Center.

April 9: Whitewater Valley Field Trip

Details: Starting at 7 am, Joel Dunnette will lead a visit to the Whitewater State Park Nature Center and look for early spring migrants—especially waterfowl in many pools—throughout the management area. Meet in the east parking lot of the Heintz Center in Rochester to carpool. Bring your own lunch. We'll return by midafternoon.

April 13: Woodcock Watch Field Trip

Details: Every spring the Woodcock performs one of the strangest and most interesting mating rituals. We will observe it up close beginning at dusk. Meet leader Jim Peterson near the entrance of Chester Woods County Park or in the horse corral parking lot at 7:30 pm. Note that a county parks sticker is required to enter the park.

April 22: Reservoir Birds Field Trip

Details: The flood control reservoirs around Rochester have created some of the best bird habitat in Olmsted County, and are where local rarities are more often found. From 8-11 am, Lance Vrieze will lead a visit to several reservoirs to see what can be spotted during migration. The series of short walks will total less than a mile. Bring a scope and binoculars if you have them, but otherwise some will be available to share. Meet in the east parking lot of the Heintz Center to carpool.

April 29: Root River Park Bird Walk

Details: Led by Sandy Hokanson, we will visit Root River County Park just south of Rochester near Simpson from 7:30 to 11 am. This park has nice walking trails and diverse habitat for a wide variety of birds. Meet in the east parking lot of the Heintz Center at 7:30 am to carpool.



Black-throated Blue Warbler
by Alan Orr

SAINT PAUL AUDUBON SOCIETY

April 13: National Parks – Protecting America's Biggest and Smallest National Treasures

Details: Our national parks just celebrated their 100th birthday. For most of us, the parks represent amazing sights like Old Faithful, El Capitan, and the Grand Canyon—but for scientists, they provide living laboratories where natural processes occur without human intervention. Dr. Mark Edlund of the University of Michigan conducts research in national parks, and will give a presentation on discovering new species, solving environmental problems, and understanding the natural world. This general meeting is free and open to the public and located at the Fairview Community Center in Roseville. The event runs from 7:00-8:30 pm, and refreshments will be served at 6:45 p.m., before the presentation begins.

MIDWEST MOUNTAINEERING EXPO

April 30: Birding/Adventure Travel and Conservation In Honduras

Details: Wilmer Fernandez is a birding enthusiast living in the metro area who grew up in Honduras. He will give a presentation highlighting the connection between Minnesota and Honduras provided by migratory birds—some of which live in Minnesota for the spring and summer before spending the winter in Central/South America. His talk will cover conservation efforts and also showcase various opportunities for birding and adventure travel across diverse ecosystems. The free event is at Hanson Hall on the University of Minnesota campus and starts at 11:45 am.



Northern Flicker
by Cathy Gagliardi

FRIENDS OF ROBERTS BIRD SANCTUARY

Saturdays in April/May: Bird Walks

Details: Every Saturday morning at 8 am from April 15 through May 31, meet in the Roberts Sanctuary parking lot for a bird walk in the Sanctuary (note that this parking lot is a pay lot, but people can park on Lake Harriet Parkway as a free alternative). All are welcome. Come and help find migratory and resident birds!

Tuesdays in April/May: Migration Walks

Details: During spring migration, the Minneapolis Audubon Society will lead bird walks in the Sanctuary—as it has for almost 100 years. Come and bird with people who carry on the legacy of those early birders, Tuesdays, April through May, at 9 am. Meet in the Roberts Sanctuary parking lot.

HENNEPIN AVENUE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

May 4-5: The Spiritual Art of Birding

Details: Come to a birding event at the Koinonia retreat center near Annandale on Lake Sylvania. This two-day event begins the afternoon of May 4 and features presenters David Austin and Bob Janssen. They will lead bird walks, present photography techniques, show identification of species, and discuss birding as a means of connecting with nature. The cost is \$74, to include lodging and three meals.



Palm Warbler
by Raymond Tervo



Minnesota Ornithologists' Union

Carpenter Nature Center
12805 Saint Croix Trail South
Hastings, MN 55033

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Carpenter Nature Center
12805 Saint Croix Trail South
Hastings, MN 55033
Email: mou@moumn.org
Web: <http://moumn.org>

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The Mission of the M.O.U.

We foster the study and conservation of birds by amateurs and professionals. We promote the conservation of birds and their natural habitats. We support these aims primarily by publishing and sharing information, by serving as a repository for records, by conducting field trips, by awarding grants for research, and by supporting programs that educate members and the public about birds.

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Birding Hotline

Northwest: 800-433-1888

MOU Contacts

Minnesota Birding: newsletter@moumn.org
President: president@moumn.org
Vice President: vicepresident@moumn.org
Membership Secretary: membership@moumn.org
Treasurer: treasurer@moumn.org
Recording Secretary: secretary@moumn.org
The Loon editor: editor@moumn.org
Web site: <http://moumn.org>
CBC compiler: cbc@moumn.org
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The Savaloja Grants supports research and other projects selected by the MOU for special attention. Your contributions help fund a better future for birds in Minnesota. You can add a contribution to your membership check.

Amount: \$ _____