

On Friday, May 9th, Mark Monroe and I did a big day run in western Kentucky to see how many species we could tally. I had been in the LBL area earlier in the week and noted a good mix of early and late passerine migrants, and with the transient lakes in Christian and Warren counties holding so many shorebirds, it looked like a good opportunity to take a shot at our previous best big day total of 176 species attained on May 6, 2002, with Michael Bierly of Nashville.

We decided on a route that, similar to 2002, began at Peabody WMA in Muhlenberg County, meandered around the northern end of Land Between the Lakes, and then went east to the end the day at the transient lakes. The weather was not predicted to be the greatest, but with only a 20% chance of showers on the day and lightish winds, we felt we might do pretty well.

Our day began about 3:00 a.m. CDT in Princeton with American Robins singing outside our hotel room. By 4:00 a.m. we were in southeastern Muhlenberg County ready to begin tallying nocturnal species. Unfortunately, we were greeted by a stiff and cool northwest wind that carried a heavy drizzle into our faces as we listened in vain for Virginia Rails to call from a marshy area. In fact, the only species we got out of our first couple of stops was Red-winged Blackbird ... not an especially auspicious beginning to our day! We subsequently found our way into a few areas protected from the wind, however, and began ticking off some target birds like Eastern Screech-Owl, Sora, Whip-poor-will, and American Woodcock at and near the Sinclair Unit of Peabody WMA. As the dawn chorus began, other targets such as Northern Bobwhite, Henslow's Sparrow, and Grasshopper Sparrow were added to the list. We lingered at Sinclair long enough to get a look at a Northern Harrier making its first flight of the morning. With only a few "misses" on the list, we figured that despite the crummy weather that we would continue with our plan to head back west to the Land Between the Lakes and see how "warblering" went.

So a straight-shot drive down the Western Kentucky Parkway had us heading towards the LBL area before sunrise. Along the way we began to add resident species such as Red-tailed Hawk and Turkey Vulture in the early morning fog and mist. At our first stop near LBL along KY 453, I pulled up without seeing the resident Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, so we swung around to put an expected territorial Bell's Vireo out the window. Right before the vireo began to sing, we noticed the male Scissor-tail sitting about 4 feet off the ground and about 30 feet right outside the car window! What a beautiful bird to start off the real "day" with!

We ran into Ben and Mary Yandell at the beginning of the Kentucky Lake Scenic Drive. It was quickly apparent that LBL was going to be great ... by the end of our second stop we already had most of the "good" regular migrant warblers such as Chestnut-sided, Cape May, Magnolia, Blackburnian, Bay-breasted, and American Redstart. An accommodating flock of Cedar Waxwings flew in overhead (they had just become regular locally in the past few days). At our third stop, Mark got on a Ruby-crowned Kinglet that would not show itself clearly to me ... the species that ended up being the only one the two of us did not both clearly identify the entire day! "Early" migrant warblers like Nashville, Black-throated Green, Yellow-rumped and Palm also were found without too much trouble, boding well for the day's list. Another stop along the loop yielded singing White-throated Sparrows and a Wilson's Warbler, and the next got us a Least Flycatcher.

We turned south on The Trace and a stop for a nice study of a partially albino Red-tailed Hawk also yielded 4 Bobolinks in an open, grassy field. While Ben & Mary continued at a more leisurely pace, Mark and I moved on towards Eddyville Ferry Road and continued to add songbirds at a nice pace. At one point a Barred Owl ... a rare miss from our pre-dawn birding ... flew across the road and landed nearby on a tree branch. We turned down Cravens Bay Road and continued to add summer resident birds like Pine Warbler and Yellow-throated Warbler. We came upon one spot with a lot of song that we recalled being good in past years, in part because of the presence of some younger trees along a margin, and decided to stop and pish a bit. A good flock of birds descended upon us and we ticked off several excellent day birds such as Red-breasted Nuthatch (a pretty male), Philadelphia and Blue-headed (in song) vireos, and a Canada Warbler. Down near the end of the road to Cravens Bay we ticked off a territorial Blue-winged Warbler and came across another Wilson's Warbler and one of our best birds of the day, a tardy Orange-crowned Warbler.

Just down the road, as we were lamenting the fact that we would probably miss Golden-winged, what should sing out the window but a Golden-winged! We stopped and pished, but despite the presence of a nice flock of birds we could not spy the Golden-winged. We followed it well back off the road and up a long hill, hoping to get a glimpse to assure that it was not a hybrid ... we had stair-stepped up the hill, at least 6-8 times hearing the bird frustratingly moving ahead of us, one minute sounding close then off again farther into the forest; we were about to give up and decided to pish one last time having reached the ridgetop; a few birds began to come in and what was one but a *female* Golden-winged! The trip up the ridge was fortuitous for two more reasons ... we heard our only Hairy Woodpecker on the day and kicked up a Swamp Sparrow in some brushy growth along the woods edge, also our only one of the day. The end of Cravens Bay Road yielded several Warbling Vireos, thus allowing us to ace the vireos for the second time in a week! Back on Eddyville Ferry Road there were many thrushes and close scrutiny of birds coming off the roadsides yielded Gray-cheeked and Veery without too much trouble. Then it was back another side road to get a territorial Cerulean Warbler that had been heard a couple of days before. It took a minute, but the bird gave us several nice songs. We proceeded to the end of this road to scan over Mammoth Furnace Bay for raptors, but a Northern Waterthrush foraging in the vegetation along the bank diverted our attention.... noteworthy as our 33rd warbler species of the morning ... the best either of us has ever done in Kentucky!

With our only reasonably expected warbler yet to find being Mourning, we decided it was time to head north out of LBL and begin scanning the lakes for waterbirds. On the way we got "important" species such as House Finch and House Sparrow out of the way in Grand Rivers. Spots on Lake Barkley and Kentucky Lake yielded a nice array of lingering waterbirds including American White Pelicans and 8 species of diving ducks (among them single Canvasback, Surf Scoter, and Red-breasted Merganser). Gulls have not been abundant this spring, but the islands in Lake Barkley contained three species including a first-year Bonaparte's. Above Kentucky Dam, Mark spied a distant Common Loon. We spun through the Kentucky Dam Village marina area and found a Red-headed Woodpecker. We then made a loop around the Cypress Creek Swamp and added Red-shouldered Hawks, Fish Crows (calling), Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Black Vulture, and Little Blue Heron on the day.

The Cypress Creek loop did not produce the hoped-for Mississippi Kite, so we ran into

the Kentucky Division of Forestry tree nursery near Kentucky Dam in hopes of seeing one over the forest there. After 5 minutes of scanning we were bummed to be getting back into the truck empty handed when a strange call from a bald cypress tree out in the swamp caught our attention. The call sounded like the “rubber ducky” notes of a Brown-headed Nuthatch, but who could imagine that was what it was? I pished as loudly as I could but the songster remained out in the swamp. I finally spotted the bird and got Mark onto it, too, a small passerine that looked for all in the world like a nuthatch! As I was scrambling to get out my scope, Mark saw it fly away to the far edge of the swamp towards the Kentucky Sheriff's Boys and Girls Ranch. We jumped into the truck and headed that way ... sure enough, large stands of Loblolly pines were on either side of the road and we began to think “man, that *was* a Brown-headed Nuthatch we just heard!” We walked out into the pines closest to where the bird had headed and within a few minutes were again hearing the distinctive notes of this southeastern pine forest bird that had only once before been reported in Kentucky. I pished the bird out into the open and we both reveled in appreciating one of those rare times when only fate can be responsible for placing you into such a chance meeting with such a rare bird :o)

I had dropped my camera a few days before and had sent it off for repair and Mark forgot to bring his, so with no chance of photo-documenting the bird [thanks to Ben & Mary for doing so later in the afternoon :o)] we headed back over Kentucky Dam to head east for shorebirds. One last stop on the dam revealed that some gulls and terns had started collecting on the Ky Dam Village marina roof, so we figured we better check them out before departing. This move gave us a Common Tern with many Forster's but we later found out that Ben & Mary had also seen 3 Laughing Gulls perched with these birds an hour or two earlier ... a near miss! A brief stop by the Kuttawa heronry did not produce a hoped-for Snowy Egret, but we did see another Common Loon and some Blue-winged Teal.

So mid-afternoon was upon us and we were off across the agricultural lands of Lyon and Trigg counties on our way towards the transient lakes of Christian County. Mark took this opportunity to check over our day list and announced excitedly that we already had 160 species ... I had guessed about 145. With many species yet to add, we knew we had a good chance to match our previous best of 176 by day's end. We marveled that we could start out so pitifully in the windy, drizzly pre-dawn, but have had such a good day since then.

On our way to Swallow Spring in Christian County we cleaned up American Kestrel and Mark found a soaring Cooper's Hawk. Then we added Eurasian Collared-Doves in the small community of Beverly, before ticking off a few common shorebirds and *another* Common Loon at Swallow Spring. We arrived at Morgan's Pond about 3:45 and immediately began ticking off more waterbirds including both Pied-billed and Horned grebe, Northern Shoveler, several expected shorebirds including Greater Yellowlegs and White-rumped Sandpiper, as well as Horned Larks and American Pipits. While at Morgan's Pond we inadvertently flushed two female Blue-winged Teal off nests along the roadsides, one containing 11 eggs. Upon our departure from Morgan's Pond about 4:45, we had matched our previous best of 176 species with McElroy Lake to go!

It's a fairly long drive across Todd and Logan counties to the Woodburn area, so on our way we plotted our strategy to end the day. Almost to Woodburn, we detoured by the Vance Road Lark Sparrow spot and within a few minutes had found a couple of birds

sitting on utility wires, yet another great species on the day.

We arrived at McElroy Lake with a good hour to scan. The south end produced Short-billed Dowitcher and Dunlin and we moved up to the middle of the west side where our last passerine of the day ... the nesting pair of Song Sparrows at the big barn ... was added. A Piping Plover, Wilson's Phalaropes, and Stilt Sandpipers were added to our day list, the plover with the unintentional assistance from the resident expert (DLR :o). We thought we would have eventually run across this pretty male because we just hadn't gotten around to scanning the closer birds yet, but—following Big Day rules outlined by the American Birding Association—we didn't add the Greater Scaup that was called to our attention by a non-participating individual at the same time. A Northern Harrier that had apparently been harassing the birds much of the day gave us our last shorebird at McElroy, two calling Long-billed Dowitchers that were put up during one of the hawk's hunting passes. We enjoyed the seeing the male Surf Scoter again, but having had one above Kentucky Dam earlier in the day, it—a long with *two more* Common Loons—didn't add to our day's species list!

With a little more than 30 minutes of daylight left, we decided to check the back side of Chaney Lake rather than try to sort through the peeps for something rare. Not long after heading down the lane at Chaney, Mark spied a large, boldly marked shorebird along the margin of the lake ... one of three Black-necked Stilts that were foraging with a decent group of mixed shorebirds. As dark approached, a good number of Common Nighthawks came up out of the forest to feed ... cleaning up the only other species that only Mark had seen earlier in the day. We hoped for a calling Great Horned Owl, but all we think we saw as dark really came upon us were 4 probable Hooded Mergansers in flight. We decided we couldn't be positive of the mergs, so we didn't count them, leaving our list at 186. As we departed Chaney, the stilts lifted up and flew off to the west.

Having missed Chuck-will's-widow in the morning, we decided to drive back towards Russellville and try a spot where I had heard Chucks several times in the past. It was 8:30 and pitch black when we arrived, but as we stepped out of the truck a nearby Chuck was singing away, #187 on the day! However, the next sound we heard was the pattering of rain on the forest canopy from an approaching shower and the bird quit singing ... what a bit of lucky timing to end the day! We headed farther down the road and got away from the shower but heard no more nightjars or owls over the course of 10-15 minutes so we decided to call it a day(night). At 187, we ended up smashing our previous high by 11 species, something I think neither of us really thought was imaginable given the drizzly start to our day.

The long drive back to Louisville was made somewhat shorter by visions of what could have been attained had we been able to do a little more scouting. However, we couldn't argue at all with the fortunes of the day! There's always another year ... maybe :o)