

May

May is a month of superlatives. The largest variety of migrants is present. The prettiest warblers come through. The biggest Big Day usually occurs in May. May is the month when the most bird song is heard. You can make a good case that May is the best month to take time off to bird.

May is superlative because migration is more concentrated in spring than it is in fall, and the greatest concentration of spring migration takes place in May. Insect larvae proliferate, providing a ready source of food for warblers, vireos, flycatchers and many other species as they pass through our state on the way to the vast area of "taiga," or boreal forest, where many of them nest. Good shorebird and marsh habitat are also often present during the last two weeks of April and the first two weeks of May. Spring rains often create playas in which shore birds congregate. Some refuges and wetland wildlife management areas deliberately create good shorebird and marsh bird habitats, either because they allow impoundments that they flooded for migrating ducks and geese in April to dry out, or, in some cases, because they purposely draw down an impoundment to attract shore birds. By late May and June, mud flats that held shore birds in May have usually either dried up completely or become covered with emerging vegetation. By then, almost all of the shorebirds have already gone through anyway.

May birding strategy usually emphasizes trying to cover as many different habitats in a day as possible. The days are longer than they were earlier in the year, so birders need to set the alarm and get out early. Migrant song birds sing and are most active between about 8:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. (Local nesters start much earlier). It makes sense to plan to spend morning hours in woodland habitat. The birder can visit shore bird and other more open country habitats during the afternoon, when activity decreases in the woods.

The simple strategy of going after song birds in the morning and shore birds in the afternoon undergoes considerable refinement when a birder wants to maximize his species list in a single day. If you want to list 125 or more species in a day, you will get to a marsh near day break, knowing that marsh birds like rails, moor hens, bitterns and Marsh Wrens are more vocal then. Your afternoon birding will include grasslands for species like Grasshopper and Henslow's Sparrows in addition to shore bird habitat. When you discover that you have a pretty good list going near the end of the day, you will want to linger in appropriate habitats at dusk to hear Whip-poor-will and Chuck-wills-widow and Screech, Barred and Great Horned Owls. There is often a renewal of bird song in woodland areas during the late afternoon, so it is often wise to hit that habitat before the Chucks and Whips get started. Somewhere during the day, a brief visit to a large lake should pad the list with species like Bonaparte's Gull, Franklin's Gull, Osprey and Caspian, Black and Forster's Terns.

The ultimate need for a comprehensive birding strategy is the Big Day, in which a team of birders goes from midnight to midnight in an effort to record as many species as possible in a single 24-hour period. Big Days are planned like military invasions. The Missouri Big Day record is 208 species, recorded by Tim Barksdale and Paul McKenzie. Other Missouri Big Days approaching 200 species have been recorded by Dave Easterla and Mark Robbins and by Dave and Todd Easterla. The Kansas Big Day record is 225, one of the highest in the nation. All were done in May.

Setting a Big Day record requires considerable luck and great endurance and bladder control in addition to a high level of birding skill. Big Day birders in Missouri usually cover a lot of miles in an effort to include southern nesting species as well as late lingering ducks and sparrows that are more likely farther north. The biggest Missouri Big Day lists, including Barksdale's and McKenzie's, have usually been compiled in the western part of the state, where species like Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Western Kingbird, Western Meadowlark, Barn Owl and Upland Sandpiper can be included. Big Day strategy in western Missouri has usually involved staking out some southern and/or Ozark species, like Pine, Worm-eating, Prairie, Blue-winged, Yellow-throated and Prothonotary Warblers, then moving north to good shore bird habitat at a place like Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge.

I ran into Barksdale and McKenzie on the day they set their record. Tim showed me his list, on which he had recorded species in the order in which they occurred. House Sparrow and Starling appeared on the list at about numbers 149 and 150 – i.e. Barksdale and McKenzie had already recorded about 148 species by the time they got their first House Sparrow of the day! It had evidently been a clear night, and they recorded many species migrating overhead while it was still dark. If my memory is correct, they got all of the Catharus thrushes that way by hearing their distinctive flight calls. Of course, that kind of birding requires great auditory acuity as well as an uncommon knowledge of the distinctive chip notes and other flight calls of birds.

In recent years, a number of “southern” species have moved farther north and west in western Missouri, and birders now know how to find them there. Blue-winged, Prairie, Hooded and Yellow-throated Warblers all bred north of Kansas City last year. At the same time, Missouri birders are finding more “western” species, like Western Kingbird, Western Meadowlark and Upland Sandpiper, farther east, and good marsh and shore bird habitats are available in the Columbia area. Future Big Day strategists may choose very different routes from those selected by Barksdale and McKenzie and by Easterla and Robbins in the past.

The best time for a Big Day in Missouri is usually between May 10th and May 15th. The “peak” of the warbler migration occurs in the northwestern part of the state then. Planners of a Big Day covering the boot heel and Mingo N.W.R., or in the Springfield or Joplin area, would probably aim for the 10th. Planners of a St. Louis or Columbia area Big Day, probably will pick a day as close to the 15th as possible.

The rush of migration in May tapers off as quickly as it builds up. The shore bird migration usually diminishes first. When most of the peeps are White-rumps, you know that the shorebird migration is almost over. If you are lucky enough to get 25 warbler species in a day in mid-May, by the 20th you may be down to 10 or 12. Many of the later warbler migrants are females, which do not sing and are hard to locate. Soon, only the breeders and a few stragglers are left.

Late May is the time to go after certain song birds, which normally come through a bit later than the others. Connecticut Warblers are most often reported in the third week of May. About May 20th is a good time to search for Connecticut Warbler at a place like Rock Bridge Memorial State Park, near Columbia. Other “later” arrivals include Willow, Alder, Yellow-bellied and Olive-sided Flycatchers and Mourning Warbler.

Migration is pretty well over by the end of May. A few Alders and Olive-sideds are usually still going through in early June. Now birding attention will turn to Breeding Bird Surveys and other activities that focus on nesters. But it is always great while it lasts!

Bob Fisher