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24 Hours of Madness; A Report from the DVOC's World Series Team

By Paul A. Guris

A BIT OF THEORY

There was once some guy named Pavlov who proposed an interesting theory. Through his work with dogs, he proposed that humans could be conditioned to take certain actions by using positive and negative reinforcement. Focusing on negative reinforcement, we can expect that if one takes some action and it has unpleasant consequences, one will cease taking that action in the future. That being said, allow me to describe this year's World Series of Birding and float a little theory of my own.

THE TEAM

The 1998 Nikon / DVOC Team was led by myself as the reluctant Team Captain. For those of you who don't know, allow me to explain what that means. The Team Captain (plus in this case his wife) buys most of the food and drink, rents the car, makes tons of phone calls, deals with the corporate sponsor, and takes verbal abuse when a staked bird doesn't appear. Our other team members were Mike "The King of South Jersey" Fritz, Adrian "Lesser Black-backed" Binns, and Bill "Bionic Ears" Stocku. Our corporate sponsor was once again Nikon Sports Optics, with Jon Allen as Guardian Angel and Lisa Maxwell as Assistant Guardian Angel. Let me digress to a public "thank you" to both of them from everybody on the team. Finally, there was my wife Anita "Logistics Queen" Guris. Thanks, honey, for finding us a perfect motel setup, finding us a van, and for putting up with this nonsense year after year.

THE WEEK BEFORE

One of the best parts of the Birdathon is the scouting. You get to spend time scouring great areas with plenty of breeding birds, while migration is still in full swing. The trees are lush with new leaves and the flowers are blooming. All is right with the world...except this year. The North Jersey forests look like they are stuck in March. Spring migrants are as abundant as morals in Washington. Early breeders aren't. Did somebody set my watch back about 3 weeks? Hey, at least most of

the lingering waterfowl have already left to compensate for the lack of songbirds.

So now it's time to scout. I have the entire week off from work. I drive myself through Worthington. I drive myself through High Point and Stokes. I drive myself into a state of depression. Where are the birds? Broad-winged isn't in. Worm-eating isn't in. Redstarts are barely in! Perhaps it's time to head for the inn? At this point, the vision of leading my team to a glorious total of 150 species is firming up in my mind. A 3-mile stretch of road in High Point produces 5 warblers — individuals, not species — and they are all Redstarts and Ovenbirds. Mike is having similar luck in the south. Kentucky Warbler isn't in. Indigo Bunting isn't in. Perhaps it's time to pack it in?

As Friday approaches, things improve a bit. I nail down two Golden-crowned Kinglets, Purple Finch, and Hermit Thrush up north. Most of expected breeders showed up in small numbers on Thursday. Down south Mike is starting to make progress through hard scouting and plenty of sharing with other birders, but Brigantine is a desert. This prompts Mike to make an exploratory move into Salem Country. He calls me with tales of wondrous birds that we so desperately need. Ruddies and Pipits and Snows, oh my! The Salem Nuclear Power Plant outflow has Bonaparte's, Little, and Black-headed Gulls, the triumvirate of little larids. We formulate a bold change to our route. For the first time since the creation of the World Series of Birding, my team will NOT be doing Brigantine. It drops from our itinerary like my head during a Barbara Walters interview.

THE FRIDAY BEFORE

Friday before the event is mentally the toughest day. Do I get some sleep or scout in the morning? Do I get some sleep or scout in the afternoon? What did I forget? What will the weather do? I choose to be semi-rested and not scout. I have enough to do with packing food and gear, getting the van, picking up Adrian, and hooking up with Mike. Bill is nice enough to be dropped

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Upcoming Field Trips

For information about these trips, contact the listed leader or call field trip chairman Bill Murphy at 215/885-2488

OCTOBER 10 - Tuckerton Marshes, NJ for Sharp-tailed Sparrows. Led by Frank Windfelder; 215/673-6240.

OCTOBER 18 - Bake Oven Knob, NJ for raptors. Led by Ron French; 215/997-1765.

Bill is looking for individuals willing to lead field trips next year. If you would like to volunteer, or if you have a suggestion as to a place to go, please call Bill at 215/885-2488.

You are cordially invited to the
DVOC Annual Banquet

Thursday, December 3, 1998
Ilona Keller's/Dugan's Restaurant
7900 Roosevelt Blvd.
Philadelphia PA
Cash Bar: 6 p.m., Dinner 7 p.m.

Guest Speaker: Peter Matthiessen

Peter's program for the evening: "The Cranes of East Asia"

Peter is considered to be one of North America's finest living nature writers. His 14 books of non-fiction include "The Wind Birds", "The Tree Where Man Was Born" and the award-winning "The Snow Leopard". He has also written several novels, including such highly acclaimed works as "Killing Mr. Watson", "At Play in the Fields of the Lord", and "Far Tortuga". Peter will be pleased to autograph copies of his books brought to the banquet.

Reservations must be received by November 26, 1998. For more information, call Bernice and Joe Koplín, banquet chairman, at 215-922-7803.

Clip the coupon and mail to:

Bernice and Joe Koplín
251 Saint Joseph's Way
Philadelphia, PA 19106

Make checks payable to DVOC.
Please indicate dinner choice on check.

Please reserve _____ spaces for:

_____ (names)

No.		Each Dinner
_____	Stuffed Breast of Capon, Wild Rice	@ \$19.00
_____	Roast Prime Rib of Beef Au Jus	@ \$24.00
_____	Flounder Stuffed with Crabmeat	@ \$24.00
	Total	_____

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off at my house. I watch the Weather Channel in hopes of an improved forecast. Saturday isn't going to be pretty. "Oh cruel front, how you mock me!"

We rent a van with sliding doors that open on both sides. We pack soda, water, and food...lots of food with Adrian and Bill on the team. Jon Allen made sure we were supplied with top quality team rain jackets, team fleece vests, team hats, and loaner Nikon Venturer binoculars for the two members who do not own them...yet. To combine both honest opinion and shameless plug, the Nikon Venturers are the best roof prism binoculars for birding currently available, end of story. We are ready.

THE BIG (WET) DAY

As it turns out, Jon is a man foresighted and the rain jackets are an omen of things to come. If Nikon supplies team inflatable kayaks next year, Birdathon day will see me heading for higher ground with pairs of every species of animal I can find.

We start, as usual, at Great Swamp. Almost none of the aquatic vegetation has emerged yet. It's cool, it's damp, it's quiet...and then the rain starts. At several points we are all huddled under the open tailgate so we can stay reasonably dry and still listen for birds. Mike and I make the same silent vow to find smaller teammates next year. After scraping up a little more than half the species we wanted, we head to Vernon Crossing. A long hike out the railroad bed actually produces a Sora. Wow! I feel my ranking on the bonehead-ometer rising quickly. This is awful!

High Point and Stokes are a bit kinder to us. The grasslands produce well, the Raven nest isn't fog-bound, and most of the stakeouts are in place. The kick in the pants, though, is that we can't take full advantage of our wonderful dual sliding van doors. The tires on the wet pavement make so much noise that we're having trouble hearing over them. We pick up no waterfowl in the north and by the time we leave Worthington, we have some real gaps and are behind schedule. The Upland Sandpipers at Linvale are jettisoned from the route with almost no discussion.

Further south, we begin to pick up steam. Adrian has nailed down a Cliff Swallow colony along the Delaware not too far from Florence (a.k.a. New Jersey's Gull Mecca). The stop not only produces the swallow, but the view to the river allows us to pick up Lesser Black-backed. Bonus! Salem County produces...and produces...and produces. Common Gallinule (I refuse to use the M-word for this bird), Ruddy Duck, Pied-

billed Grebe, and Caspian Tern are where they belong. The Bobolink and Pipit are in their field, with the Snow Geese just down the road. The Nuclear Power Plant not only produces the gulls but also Black Tern. So what if they have a slight green glow to them. We figure that they won't mutate into new species for at least another week.

The rest of the day is a bit of a grind. There is still a little rain and the winds are howling, but we are actually getting birds. We barely get most of the birds we need in Cumberland Country, but getting a bird twice doesn't make the checkmark any darker. Contrary to the itinerary, Mike has us run to the coast early. He knows that high tide will be brutal, and we need to miss it. At Nummy's Island, we see marsh. Teams that arrive two hours later see water. At Cape May Point we sustain our only injury. Bill rips his finger open on a rusty fence, but still sees the Parasitic Jaeger. I bind his wound with a bandana, and we're off again. At dusk the weather is still crummy, but Whip-poor-will and Chuck-will's-widow call at our traditional spot. As always, the rest of the night is a series of desperation moves for Black Rail and nocturnal migrants. We tough it out while suppressing our combined urge to head for the bar. Finally, it's time to head for Cape May Point State Park and the finish line. Our official total is 198, our team jackets have kept us reasonably dry, and Bill has not passed out from blood loss.

THE FINISH LINE

We pull into the finish line. For the weather and the migration, 198 is a very respectable total. All Bill wanted out of this event was a 200 species day. We kind of feel sorry for him, but torment him about it just the same. Besides, we need some leverage to get him to come back next year. The team walks in looking cool in matching Nikon hats and rain jackets, black with yellow logos. We have nice matching black bags under our eyes, but the red in our eyeballs clashes a little. Maybe we can get yellow contact lenses for next year.

I walk up to the table and turn in our total. I kiss my wife who is in charge of tallying the cumulative species count. "We finished with 198. Under the circumstances, I think we did OK." She looks at me and says, "I think that's the highest total I've heard about tonight." She's such a sweet-talker. Anyway, it's nice to know we are going to finish well.

Our team begins milling around, nibbling on some food, catching up with friends we haven't seen in awhile, and sucking down yet more caffeine. Suddenly Mike comes up and tells me that most, if not all, of the stiffest

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competition has checked in, and we're still in the lead. It's almost midnight! After doing this event every year but one, I may actually attain something I never thought I would; winning the World Series of Birding! We are getting psyched!

But alas, it is not to be. Just a few minutes before midnight, a dark horse team comes in with exactly 200. To quote the great orator Homer Simpson, "DOH"! Well, it's better than a sharp stick in the eye...or at least it is now. Anita tells me later that their team saw 8 or 9 species no other team got. Their list is nothing short of amazing. They ticked Short-eared Owl, an incredible bird for May. They saw Long-billed Dowitcher when none were reported for the entire week. They nailed Yellow-bellied Flycatcher on the earliest Birdathon date during the latest migration I've ever experienced, again with none reported for the entire week. They wrote in Henslow's Sparrow from the same grasslands scouted and visited by us and at least 10 other teams. I still need that for a Jersey bird! And their American Tree Sparrow was the probably the latest record for New Jersey by a month.

Seriously, though, we were not that upset. We realize that this event is first and foremost a fund-raiser. If you really want to crown a winner, the Cornell team raised over \$500 per bird. Their final total of 190 was good for enough for a 4th place finish, but their total of nearly \$100,000 blew away all competition. I like to think that the amount we shared birds with them helped to increase that number. "Hey guys, how about a 70/30 split on those extra birds? You know, a little sumfin' for dah effort."

EPILOGUE

Now we can return to my original premise. The migration was terrible. The wind and rain were hideous. We went without sleep for longer than the human body is prepared to. We went for over 24 hours without a beer (longer than MY human body is prepared to). And we placed second at the last minute by two lousy birds. So one could easily deduce that we would never do this silly event again, right? Well, one would be wrong. We were planning next year by the next day. The desire to bird cuts through negative conditioning like Adrian through a beer keg that has no tap. With all due respect, Mr. Pavlov, it is you who are all wet.

SPECIAL THANKS

In addition to again thanking Nikon and my wife for supporting us to the hilt, I'd like to thank the Team Captains that I have followed in the past; Brian

Moscattello, Rick Mellon, and Megan Edwards. I'd like to thank everybody who was willing to openly share scouting information, particularly Steve Kelling and the Cornell University team. It is nice to see that the vast majority of participants remember that this event was created primarily to raise money for conservation. Finally, thanks to Pete Dunne of New Jersey Audubon for coming up with this crazy scheme in the first place. Oh yeah, and to the brewery that ultimately inspired him to think of it.

Upcoming Programs

OCTOBER 1 - Birds of Guyana. Club member Sally Conyne introduces us to the birds of this South American country.

OCTOBER 15 - Bicknell's/Gray-cheeked Thrushes. Club member Frank Windfelder walks us through the identification of these recently-split species.

NOVEMBER 5 - Member Slide Night. Here's the chance to show your stuff. Compete for prizes in categories ranging from birds and animals to landscapes. Bring your best slides!

NOVEMBER 19 - Birds of Japan. The club's own Armas Hill presents the avifauna of this Far Eastern Country. *Please note that the annual banquet will be the first meeting in December this year!*

DECEMBER 3 - ANNUAL BANQUET. Special guest Peter Matthiessen presents a program on the Cranes of East Asia.

DECEMBER 17 - PA Rare Birds Committee. Committee member and DVOCer Nick Pulcinella (and others) introduce us to the rare birds committee — what it is, how it operates, and how to submit a record.

Send information you would like considered for publication in the Philadelphia Larus to:

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