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BIRD-WATCHING ADDS UP TO SOUND ADVENTURE.

BY G. PATRICK PAWLING

IT'S 4:45 A.M. and mist hugs the ground. The murky beacon of the 144-year-old Cape May Lighthouse sweeps an asphalt parking lot every 15 seconds, illuminating dozens of cars, two empty buses, clumps of sluggish people, and one woman who will not stop moving.

Her name is Patricia Sutton. Thin as a rumor and just as persistent, she appears to be in charge. She greets. She directs. She smiles. She checks her clipboard. Clearly something big is going to happen, if only she can herd these folks into those idling school buses.

It's the morning of the World Series of Birding. For Sutton and a lot of other people who love bird-watching—birding, they call it—it is the biggest day of the year.

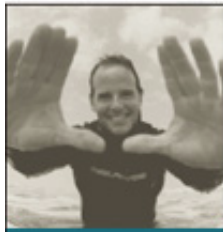
The World Series is not about admiring robins at your feeder. It's an international competition and like most big sporting events, it's largely about money. What's different is who gets it.

This event is a simple fund-raiser from which every penny of the \$8 million raised over its 20-year run (through individual pledges and corporate sponsorship) has gone directly to conservation groups and causes. Competitors persuade sponsors to pay a certain amount for each bird spotted, then the competitors show up on the appointed day in May to find as many birds as they can, by sight and by sound, in 24 hours straight—without breaking too many laws or, at least, without getting caught.

The weird part, to most non-birders, is where it happens: New Jersey. As it turns out, the Pavement State is renowned for its diverse habitat—mountains, beaches, pine forests, meadows—and for great birding, spring and fall.

What's also unusual is that anybody can play. The World Series is open to novices, as well as children.

Yet it is one of the most grueling and prestigious birding competitions in the world. For serious teams, it's a quest, a multi-year ascent—that nobody wins on their first try. It's just too difficult. Strategy is debated throughout the year. Scouts scour the state in the weeks before the start. Good routing is vital. Shaving just a few minutes off the drive from point to point can make the difference. So can going 90 miles per hour instead of 70.



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And how participants find the birds varies. Some walk. Some bike. One group, known to follow unfathomable birding tradition, will draw a circle 17 feet in diameter and will not leave it except for bathroom breaks. The teams who want to win drive the entire state, top to bottom, careening from one pre-scouted site to the next for the entire 24 hours, midnight to midnight, swarming out of their vehicles like birding SWAT teams in search of Bonaparte's gulls, bald eagles, turkey vultures, and prothonotary warblers.

Renowned artist and naturalist Roger Tory Peterson (1908-1996) anchored the winning 1984 team, along with David Sibley, who has since published an acclaimed birding field guide. Yet many of the hard-core competitors are not ornithological researchers but civilians who have taken their love of birding to a special obsessive place. One of the teams considered a favorite today, the Lagerhead Shrikes from the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club, includes a pharmacist, a nursery manager, and a business consultant.

With two school buses capable of maybe reaching 60 on a steep hill, as if there were any hills in south Jersey, Sutton has a purpose other than winning. Her goal is to have fun and raise money. And to help people like birding. So every year she loads up a mix of newcomers and experts and heads out to the nearby countryside, not venturing too far from her starting line at the lighthouse. While the "real" competitors have already started at midnight, her Cape May Century Run team rolls out at 5 a.m.

Today there's a total of 43 passengers of various abilities, including 10 guides. First stop is Hidden Valley Ranch, not far from the ocean at the southernmost tip of New Jersey.

Near a corral, we stumble out of the buses, the mist having eaten all available light. Sutton, whisper-shouting, gathers our group and summons us to be quiet so we can begin "spotting" birds by sound. There! The "whoooo-whooooo" of a great horned owl. Then as the other birds relax into song, it's cacophony. Somebody asks Sutton what they're saying. She smiles. Birds talk about what we talk about: food, predators, mating. With Sutton's help—she holds her hand up as individual songs present themselves—we begin isolating the sounds.

"Chic-a-dee-dee-DEE" says a Carolina chickadee.

"Witchety, witchety, witchety," calls a common yellow-throat.

"Peeter, peeter," chirps a tufted titmouse.

"Madam, who cooks for you? Who cooks for you?" says a barred owl.

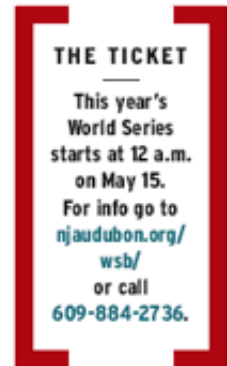
As we move on to another meadow, light fights through the gloom. Now we can start trying to actually see birds. It goes like this: Look for movement. Raise binocs slowly, without allowing eyes to leave target. Look in the binocs. See branches. Scan. See more branches. Hear extravagant descriptions of the

bird that is...where? “OK, see the ‘ Y ’ branch, the more leafy one left of the oak? About 11 o’clock from there, just past the....” Scan more. Find the bird—now a blur because it is leaving.

By 8 a.m., only three hours into our day, we’ve spotted 63 birds, including a ruby-throated hummingbird. Number 63 is a least tern, endangered because it shares its nesting area—beaches—with people, dogs, and cats. Other members of the team must confirm each sighting, but the competition basically works on the honor system. Occasionally there are hushed conversations about the veracity of some teams’ sightings, but never has a voice truly been raised. In birding, honor stands.

Ah. There’s a nice blue bird. Sutton is ecstatic: “Hey everybody, look at the beautiful grosbeak! Do you have him? Absolutely breathtaking!”

Around 10 a.m., she points out the song of a warbling vireo as it hunts its caterpillar prey. Birders describe it with a smile: “If I could see you I would seize you and squeeze you till you squirt.” As our bus rolls on to our next location, a wood and meadow, we eat homemade brownies and talk. One woman describes the previous year’s “fallout,” when scores of birds suddenly settled in around her group, playing, chatting, feeding, and preening like stars at the Emmys. “Best day of my life,” she says. An older woman confides that she has painful arthritis in her knees, but refuses to miss a World Series. A mother from Pennsylvania introduces her 10-year-old son, who will spot the team’s 100th bird, a great black-backed gull. A lobbyist from Washington, D.C., says he birds to “decompress.” A young woman from Florida, about to graduate from college, is on her third World Series. Most are not experts, but are knowledgeable and thirsty for more. The leaders include Vince Elia, a researcher with New Jersey Audubon’s Cape May Bird Observatory in Goshen, New Jersey, which hosts the World Series.



Hour after hour we climb back onto the buses, ride a bit, then get out and walk some more. The pace is leisurely compared to the one kept by the teams racing around the state, but Sutton is relentless. She guides us past farm buildings, through meadows, and onto deserted Delaware Bay beaches where the only sounds are shorebirds and waves. This is a New Jersey many people will never know exists. Beautiful. Open. Unpaved. And continually threatened by development.

A little after noon we spot a great blue heron, number 104.

At 2 p.m., nine hours after our start, we’re walking single-file down a narrow path that follows abandoned railroad tracks and runs through a black-water swamp. It’s as if we’re on patrol in a war movie, everybody moving quietly, barely breathing. Elia, the patrol leader, holds his hand up—Stop!—and tries a whistle-like call—a harsh “Zweet! Zweet! Zweet!” Then he sets up his spotting scope, which is more powerful than binoculars. The bird he focuses on, a male prothonotary warbler, is beyond yellow. He is brilliant-yellow. Orange-yellow. Explosive-yellow. He’s incredibly stunning.

At 2:45 p.m., somebody calls a spotted sandpiper (123) on a jetty that’s jutting off into the Delaware Bay. And there’s a school of dolphins.

At 8:03 p.m., we see a whippoorwill (153) and at 8:30 p.m. we spot what will be the final bird of the day. It’s an eastern phoebe, sitting in a nest on a light at the entrance to a campground. Trying for another species or two, the team stays out until 10:30 p.m., having already put in a 19-hour day. But to no avail. Our 154 birds is good for 20th place out of 72 teams, and \$10,470 in pledges. Not bad for a

bus tour.

The top teams remain out until the last possible moment, pushing the midnight deadline for one last lucky species. Among them are the Nikon-sponsored Lagerhead Shrikes, who scramble in with minutes to spare. They look like heck but their number is pretty: 231. As midnight passes it becomes clear nobody will beat them. For their efforts they get a nice trophy, birding fame, such as it is, and the right to sleep well.

They won't. The year will pass quickly. There is much to do. Only the early bird gets the trophy. ★

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