

Take Me out to the World Series ... of Birding

A brutal test of brains, endurance, and the ability to make funny noises

By SUSAN MILIUS

May 7, World Series minus 8 days and counting: Oh, for heaven's sake. I'm not threatening to kick down the locker room door and interview anybody naked. I do admit to trying to set up interviews with a World Series team, but we're talking about the World Series of Birding.

I'm negotiating by phone with John Fitzpatrick, director of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. A scrub jay and flycatcher specialist, and the discoverer of several South American bird species, he's a key player on that World Series powerhouse the Sapsuckers. In a week plus a few hours, Fitzpatrick and four lab colleagues will match wits with 57 other teams in the oldest and most famous birding contest, sponsored by the New Jersey Audubon Society.

In its 16th year, the event has evolved a variety of subcategories, but the Sapsuckers are going for the main event, the one that offers a silver cup big enough to float a duck. To win, a team has to identify the most species within a specific 24 hours in New Jersey.

New Jersey?

Absolutely, Fitzpatrick says. The Atlantic Flyway, the path that millions of birds take northward from their winter homes to summer breeding habitat, sweeps up through the Garden State. I see that the spring migration brings avian rush-hour traffic in the skies, so what better place to watch it than New Jersey?

As I explain how I want to follow an all-scientist team in this event, I'm struck by the undercurrent in Fitzpatrick's usual easy charm with the press. Today he's still charming, but there's the sound of handling-a-situation, as if I've said something really shocking.

Indeed I have, but I won't realize this

for a week. What I've done, in my naïveté, is ask if I can ride in the Sapsucker van.

After all, in the 1992 World Series, a writer for the Wall Street Journal rode with the Northern Beardless Tyrannulets. Marie Winn was able to give a first-hand account of such key events as the finding of a mourning warbler, even though she did have to take a bus home from the finish line when the team wanted to keep on birding.

The event may drive birders delirious with pleasure, but it's murder for avian-sports reporters. Each team picks its own starting

Yellow-bellied sapsucker

point, anywhere in the state. There is one finish line, thank goodness, but teams reach it by any path they choose, zigzagging along routes they revise at the chip of a sparrow.

Although a speeding ticket knocks a team out of the contest, the event retains a road-race zest. Since all top contestants can recognize hundreds of species in the dark a quarter mile away, the amount of territory covered can be decisive.

The driving abnormalities of birders in general—sudden swerves and slow-downs, exotic lane changes and pullovers—multiply as tension builds. Even if a reporter in a chase car could manage not to lose a team's van or die backing down an exit ramp, there's the risk that the reporter's vehicle screeching to a halt could scare away a bird. In which case, a reporter could come to an untimely end after an attack with a spotting scope.

In retrospect, I recognize that Fitzpatrick reacted with amazing calm and generosity. We do not discuss how the reporter-laden Tyrannulets came in 20th, whereas the Sapsuckers ranked first

among out-of-state teams last year and this year are serious contenders to float their ducks in that big silver trophy.

Fitzpatrick explains that much more than Sapsucker honor is at stake. Cornell lab supporters have pledged about \$550 per species that the team finds, and he hopes to log more than 210. The time for one more person to clamber in and out of the van, the extra chance noises that might drown out a distant trill, the distractions of dealing with a stranger—he puts it delicately, but in essence, an extra person might cost his team a bird.

Nevertheless, Fitzpatrick offers to confide the team's beginning location so I can at least watch the World Series start.

WS minus 3 days: Is this for real? I might as well be searching for Jimmy Hoffa. The tentative information I have is that the Sapsuckers will meet me Friday night in the Great Swamp of New Jersey. At midnight.

WS minus 4 hours: Fitzpatrick has phoned with a reassuringly normal-sounding dinner invitation from two of his lab's board members, JoAnn Little and Randy Little. When I reach their home near Basking Ridge, N.J., a map of the state drapes the kitchen table,

and five already sleep-deprived Sapsuckers surround it. Team captain Ken Rosenberg, grassland bird specialist Jeff Wells, and crow expert

King rail

Kevin McGowan have finished reports on long days of scouting missions, and neurobiologist Steve Kelling is strategizing the attack on South Jersey. This table, where they plan the route, could be where they win or lose.

Fitzpatrick writes a tidy schedule on a legal pad. To reach the kind of numbers



Lang Elliot/Cornell Lab. of Ornithology



Lawrence Wales/CLO

they want, they have to average finding a bird about every 7 minutes, and some stops are allotted only 30 seconds.

As the schedule marches down the fifth page, JoAnn Little calls the team to a steak-chicken-pasta feast. In 1997, before she became Sapsucker chef, McGowan consumed a deli sub around 3 a.m. The team still talks about that sub since McGowan developed food poisoning in the van during the contest. Of course, he didn't drop out, and he credits plastic bags with saving the team a lot of unscheduled roadside stops.

A mild uproar breaks out when I ask what keeps people from adding a few extra warblers here and there. Birding honor remains strict, they say, and cheating isn't as easy as it may sound. The teams become acutely aware of bird whereabouts, so anomalies stand out. Also, this year, each team can report only one bird that its members alone find.

What also ruffles the Sapsuckers' feathers, although they don't call it outright cheating, is another team's legendary response to the speeding-ticket ban. A certain group (Fitzpatrick goes ostentatiously vague about its name) one year took along a state trooper to drive. "They won't give tickets to one of their own," Wells explains, as the dining room electrifies with outrage.

Several years ago, a siren and flashing lights interrupted the Sapsuckers en route. Deep in ornithological debate, they'd forgotten to keep an eye on the speedometer. The trooper eyed the van, asked if they were with the World Series of Birding, and then said, "Got a bald eagle yet? There's one down that way..."

The Sapsuckers thanked him for his directions and then faced the dilemma that the eagle, which they could have used, seemed too far away. Yet ignoring a trooper's tip posed its own risks. The team continued driving its planned route, but very carefully.

WS minus 20 minutes: Thanks to logistic difficulties—involving permits and gate keys—and Sapsucker big-heartedness, I am riding in the van for the start of the contest. My original request, I see now, was no more shocking than asking NASA if I could just sit quietly in the capsule and watch the guys land on the moon.

The van has more room than the Apollo cockpit, but not much. More dire is the issue of psychic space. This is not your average bird walk, and these are not well-rested people. I can see that in a few more hypertense hours, the Sapsuckers will face a danger of spontaneous combustion.

McGowan starts a scramble among the gear when he mentions that somewhere

he has packed a Cornell cassette of nocturnal calls to play in the van. Many migrants fly at night, and their flight calls often do not resemble the sounds the average birder recognizes on the ground.

The search stops when Kelling points out that they all know the tape by heart, anyway. "Imagine you're standing outside on a warm summer night. . . ." an oily, mock-announcer voice from the back seat mimics the tape's introduction. A surprisingly realistic Canada goose honks next to my ear, and then the van fills with imitations of whickers, gaacks, tickitys, trills, whistles, clacks, hoots—the whole avian world simultaneously and on fast forward. Fortunately, we do not meet a state trooper.

WS minus 5 minutes: The Sapsuckers have taken their first position in the swamp. Standing on what I hope is solid ground, I see them as dim gray shapes just ahead of me. On either side, the swamp drops into blackness. It's chilly.

Even though it's almost midnight, team members wear their binoculars,



Cornell Sapsuckers (left to right, front) Ken Rosenberg, Jeff Wells, (back) Steve Kelling, Kevin McGowan, and John Fitzpatrick prepare to spend a tough day in New Jersey to defend their trophy and to raise funds for surveys of cerulean and golden-winged warblers.

all from their Austrian sponsor Swarovski Optik. It's not just habit. McGowan hands me his to try, and I'm surprised to see images a little brighter than they appear with the naked eye.

"Virginia rail," Kelling says suddenly, though the team can't count any birds that they hear before midnight.

The Sapsuckers orient in one direction and grow still again. I realize I won't be able to take notes because the felt-tip pen makes too much noise.

A Canada goose, a real one, honks, then honks, then honks some more. The team shifts with disgust.

There's a distant hooing—"who cooks for youuu" is the traditional birders' mnemonic—and several voices call out, "Barred owl." Then, there's a collective, clipped "Ah." The rail has apparently called again.

I haven't heard a thing that could be a rail during these last few minutes. Or have I? The team falls into listening stillness again, and I wonder if that little . . . No, that's faraway traffic. And that's the wretched goose. And that . . . could that be a bird? Or the call of my own pulse?

A sudden, multibarrelled burping, nearby and thunderous after all the strained listening, nearly launches me into the swamp. I hear Fitzpatrick, in a mockery of the birders' ID call, announce, "Green frog."

Cape May warbler



May 15, WS 12:02 a.m.: "Barred owl."

Good. Fitzpatrick has been lobbying for the honor of first bird not to go to that goose. Which honks almost immediately afterwards and ranks as second bird.

The rail calls again, apparently. I'm awed at how the Sapsuckers pick out birds from the faint rustles, hums, and creaks of the swamp at night.

After a sora rail and a marsh wren call, we move. By some long-established team consensus, Rosenberg is the one to imitate king rails. We fall silent. He steps forward, pauses, then makes several breathy grunts.

Later, listening to a bird-call tape, I realize just how good Rosenberg's imitation was. Couldn't mimickry confuse birders nearby, I ask him after the event. "We know for a fact that we've been counted by other teams" in other years, he says.

Still, good ears can tell. Rosenberg remembers one maddening night when rails weren't responding to his best efforts. In an overcaffeinated meltdown, he burst into his imitation of a South American bird. From the darkness, a voice called, "Ken Rosenberg? Is that you?" The other birder hadn't seen Rosenberg for several years but recognized the call.

As well as imitating calls, the team sometimes claps and then freezes to see if birds reply.

At one point, Rosenberg pelts the swamp with pebbles. Sometimes the tactics work.

The team finds more



Cerulean warbler

than a dozen species in the swamp, including a great horned owl, a yellow-breasted chat, and the only black-

billed cuckoo they encounter during the contest, this one recognized by its flight call.

The team also finds other contestants and at one point gets stuck in a three-van gridlock on a narrow, overgrown lane.

WS 1:42 a.m.: The Sapsuckers are in high spirits as the van jounces out of the swamp. They drop me at my car, wave, and head north. The roadside suddenly seems so quiet I wonder if I've dreamed it all.

WS 4 a.m.: After an intense survey of several miles of route 22, I find the motel where I'd made reservations. Then I spend a couple of hours trying to read myself to sleep, but *Peterson's Field Guide* proves too stimulating. I give up and start driving south to see how the teams are doing.

WS 11:30 p.m.: I've seen a lot of entertaining birds and people during the day, but no Sapsuckers of either sort. Here at the finish line, at Cape May Lighthouse, two rooms fill with giddy teams of birders bug-eyed with fatigue.



P. & S. Stettenheim/CLO

This year's World Series includes two teams named Orioles plus teams called the Lyric Cas-sowaries, the Wandering Tattlers, Wild Bird Center of America Re-Tailed Hawks, the Not Too Swifts, the Wrending Talons, and the Green Mountain Goatsuckers.

Barred owl

WS 11:50 p.m.: The last teams are crowding in now. I see no Sapsuckers. I do find John Sterling of the Smithsonian's Woodpeckers, sponsored by Bushnell Sports Optics. He looks glazed but says his team has broken 200 species for the first time.

WS 11:59 p.m.: Still no Sapsuckers.

WS midnight: At last. In the mob, I spot familiar caps and heads. Wells, Kelling, and McGowan are standing in a shell-shocked clump. They say they nearly ran out of gas but made it to the only service station still open in Cape May. They reached the lighthouse without a second to spare.

They've had a roller-coaster day. By 9 a.m., they had 137 species, more than their wildest hopes. Then, they got stuck in beach traffic on I-80, losing 40 minutes.

Remembering their 30-second stops, I dread to think about the mood in the van. "Morale was low," Kelling understates.

Fearing they'd blown the best lead they'd ever had, they soldiered on, and by 5:30 p.m., they'd tied their previous record of 204 species. They heard their last new species, a yellow rail, one of the rarest birds in New Jersey, about 9 p.m.

And their score? "220," says Kelling.

I'm about to whoop, when Kelling explains that the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club of New Jersey beat them by three birds. While the Sapsuckers fumed in traffic, the home team had chosen back roads in north Jersey, logging three grassland species the Sapsuckers never picked up.

The Sapsuckers again win the trophy for the best out-of-state team, but they're still eyeing the top prize. Next year, they'll be back at the kitchen table. □

Birding for science

The energy that birders, both amateur and academic, bring to their pursuit could easily power a medium-sized city, once a few technical details get ironed out. In the meantime, ornithologists are exploring how to harness this zest to collect data over a range far beyond the ken of a single research team. Says Jeff Wells of Cornell University and a member of its birding team, "It's a new era of citizen science."

Among the projects in which scientists have used data gathered by volunteers:

- A survey of more than 2,000 sites suggests that tanagers in mid-Atlantic states and the Midwest are more sensitive to the fragmentation of forests than birds in the more heavily wooded Northeast. The data were reported in the June CONSERVATION BIOLOGY.

- A new analysis of the volunteer Breeding Bird Survey estimates the impact of forest fragmentation, according to a presentation in June at the 1999 meeting of the Society for Conservation Biology.

- Papers in several publications, including the April 1998 JOURNAL OF WILDLIFE DISEASES, are tracking the spread and impact of a house finch disease. —S.M.



William Patfr/CLO

Scarlet tanager

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