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1986: A NEBRASKA BIG YEAR

In January of 1986 my brother, Ed M. Brogie, and I were tallying our lists for Nebraska when the question arose: "How many species of birds do you think one could see in Nebraska in one year?". The previous year (1985) had been the first year we had made a serious attempt at seeing western Nebraska species and chasing rarities in the state. Our efforts had yielded such birds as Bean Goose, Green-tailed Towhee, Black-necked Stilt, Red Phalarope, Lewis' Woodpecker, Sprague's Pipit, Cassin's Finch, Cassin's Kingbird, and King Eider. When 1985 ended, my Nebraska life list stood at 290 and I had seen 237 species in the state for the year, without any real attempt to see migrant songbirds.

At the beginning of February I made a list of all the birds that occurred in Nebraska and assigned them a code number 1-5) according to the following criteria:

1. common nesting or common migrant - 197
2. uncommon nesting or regular migrant - 54
3. rare or local nesting or casual migrant - 40
4. uncommon or hard to find casual or regular migrant - 36
5. rare migrant - 75+

Subjective considerations, such as distance one would have to travel to appropriate habitat and ease of identification also influenced code number. I thought that with enough luck and effort I could see 240 of the 251 Code 1 and 2 birds, and if I chased rarities and concentrated on finding Code 3 species I hopefully could add 35 more; thus my goal was 275 species for 1986.

I learned in March that Barbara Padelford had seen 267 species of birds in Nebraska in 1985, and

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later I learned that Tanya Bray had also equaled this number. As far as I could discern, this was the record number of birds anyone had seen in one year in Nebraska. At the end of March my year list was 111 species, including 7 Code 3 species: Evening Grosbeak, Common Redpoll, Red-shouldered Hawk, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Trumpeter Swan, and Cinnamon Teal.

The first week of April brought my first "big chase" of the year. At about 9:00 PM on Friday 4 April Gary Lingle called to say that three Whooping Cranes had landed for the night in an accessible area just east of North Platte. It was perfect in the sense that the weather was to be good, and since my wife, Ellen, and I are both teachers, we had the weekend free. The only problem was the birds were over 250 miles from Creighton and getting there would take some time. Ellen had a meeting until ten o'clock, so she was surprised to find her bags packed when she came home. I made several phone calls and by midnight Ellen and I were on the road in the company of Roger and Isolde Cutshall. Just after sunrise on the 5th we were all observing our first Nebraska Whooping Cranes and my first Code 4 bird of the year. We drove to Grand Island that afternoon and found 3 Surf Scoters (1 adult and 2 immatures) on the lake at the Mormon Island Recreation Area and I saw my second code 4 species for the day.

Eldon Marsh of Brunswick (Antelope Co.) called me on the 20th, saying he had seen a Sprague's Pipit (Code 4) that evening just east of where he lives. Ellen and I picked him up after school the next day and drove to the native grass pasture where he and his wife, Barbara, had observed the bird. We had walked only about 50 yards into the pasture when we flushed a bird which made a towering flight and then dropped back to earth. We got a good view of the bird, with its streaked back and its flesh-colored legs before we flushed it a second time.

During the last week of April, Ellen and I spent two days in northwestern Nebraska and added several species for the year; most notable a male and a female Cassin's Finch (Code 3), which we observed for about 20 minutes on 26 April, at Chadron State Park.

May brought migrants and several unexpected species. I spent the 3rd and morning of the 4th birding in Fontenelle Forest in the company of Bob Steinauer and Tanya Bray. I observed over 100 species during these two days, of which 38 were new for the year. Highlights included White-eyed Vireo, and my first Yellow-crowned Night-Heron and Yellow-throated Warbler.

May continued to yield good birds; on the 15th in Dixon Co. Ed and I had Philadelphia Vireo, Alder Flycatcher, and Short-billed Dowitcher, all of which I had considered would be hard-to-find Code 3 birds. Mike Erickson and I visited extreme western and northcentral Nebraska on the 17th and 18th and I picked up 12 new year birds, including a pair of Northern Mockingbirds in Cherry Co. During our field work for the Nature Conservancy in this area in 1982 we had found this species on

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several occasions, but it was very uncommon. Even though we had found Western Flycatcher, Western Tanager, Brewer's Sparrow, Cassin's Kingbird, Least Tern, and Barn-Owl I considered the Mockingbird to be the best bird of the trip, for unlike the others, I know of no area that I could be certain to locate it during the course of the year.

The month of May continued; Red-necked Phalarope and Ruddy Turnstones in Pierce Co. on the 19th, Magnolia Warbler in Dixon Co. the next day, four new year birds in Knox Co. on the 21st, including American Woodcock, a bird which I had mistakenly given a Code 3, as I found it very common locally along parts of the Niobrara River. The 22nd of May was a fantastic day; Ed M. Brogie, Paul Pearson, David Stage, and I found a male Mourning Warbler, a female Connecticut, and a male MacGillivray's Warbler, all within 20 minutes, in Cedar Co. (NBR 55:41-42). My first Code 5 bird of the year came on the night of 25 May when Ed and I were birding in northwestern Knox Co. and heard and tape-recorded the vocalizations of a Black Rail (NBR 55:40-41). On the 26th Ed, Ellen, and I spent part of the day birding with Wayne Mollhoff in Boone Co. and succeeded in finding four more new year birds: Willow Flycatcher, Long-eared Owl, Green-backed Heron, and a Code 3 Least Bittern. My last new bird for May was a Blue Grosbeak we found later that day in Knox Co. when several of us, without success, tried to relocate the Black Rail. During the month of May I had identified 219 species, of which 87 were new for the year.

I spent the first part of June out of the state, and finally saw a new species for the year 14 June: a Red Crossbill in Wayne Co. Bill Huser and I spent the 14th through the 18th birding the Panhandle and the southwestern part of the state. New species for the year included Western Wood-Pewee (my last of the 197 Code 1 birds), Lewis' Woodpecker, and Solitary Vireo. Other highlights included Northern Mockingbirds and finding new areas with Cassin's Kingbirds and Western Flycatchers. I birded Fontenelle Forest 20 June, and with the help of Bob Steinauer I finally succeeded in adding Cerulean Warbler and then Kentucky Warbler to my year list. These two Code 2 species had worried me, in that I had missed them so far for the year despite several efforts to locate them. The Kentucky Warbler was my 268th species, and my last new bird for the first half of the year.

During the last week of June and the first three weeks of July, Ellen and I were out of the state birding in southern Texas, Big Bend National Park, southeastern Arizona, and Colorado. We saw many new birds, and Ellen broke 500 on her life list with a Plain-capped Starthroat, in Arizona.

We returned to Nebraska on 18 July, in Kimball Co., and spent a good deal of time looking for Mountain Plover, to no avail. Loren Padelford called me on 25 July, saying a Black Scoter had been seen at DeSoto NWR that day. I was there

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early the next morning, and although I did not see the Scoter, I did see my first Snowy Egret (Code 4) for Nebraska and added Sedge Wren for the year.

In early August Ellen and I found Carolina Wren in Fontenelle Forest on the 6th and later that evening had Chuck-will's-widow in Richardson Co. A few days later Richard Rosche reported seeing California Gulls at Lake McConoughy and on 14 August I also found and photographed this gull at the Keystone Lake area (*NBR* 54:77). August also brought new warblers for the year: Wilson's and Canada in Cuming Co. on the 23rd, Blackburnian in Knox Co. on the 27th, and Bay-breasted, also in Knox Co., on the 30th. The month ended with Mike Erickson and me making a trip on the 31st to York Co., where we found a large group of Cattle Egrets. On the way down we found a Little Blue Heron in Platte Co. I had missed these two Code 2 species several times already during the year close to home and was very glad to see them. When August ended I had 279 species for the year and had met my goal, although I knew there were several species I still could see.

I added three new birds in September, and all of these were found on the same day. On 5 September once again the Padelords called me and said that B.J. Rose had found Red Knots (Code 4) at Lake Babcock, in Platte Co. Jeff Chrynoweth, Ellen, and I were there the next day, and after several hours of searching we finally found them. During the course of looking for the Knots we also saw Caspian Tern (Code 3) and Black-bellied Plover (Code 2), which were new for the year. Caspian Terns and several shorebird species were also present at Willow Creek (Pierce Co.) that evening. We saw 22 different species of shorebirds that day!

B. J. Rose found a Red Phalarope at Lake Babcock during the second week of October, and on the 13th Ellen and I left right after school and drove to see this Code 5 bird. We found the Phalarope and were able to approach it within 10 yards. The bird was in immature plumage, and I took several pictures of it. Ed and I had found this species in Pierce Co. in September 1985 (*NBR* 53:72-73), which was only the second Nebraska record, and I felt very fortunate to see this bird two years in a row. I found several Townsend's Solitaires in Halsey National Forest on 24 October and was glad to finally see this Code 2 bird.

November started out well with my first Pine Warbler (Code 4) for Nebraska. Ed and I found it 2 November in the Wayne Cemetery. We also saw a Palm Warbler that day, which was my second for the year but a notable late date. On 5 November I found an Oldsquaw (Code 4) at the Pierce sewage treatment plant, and three days later, while a group of us were observing this bird Isolde Cutshall found a White-winged Scoter. This code 3 bird was a year bird for me and a life bird for several of the observers. On 9 November Mike Erickson, Ed, and I went to DeSoto NWR and found another White-winged Scoter and a Surf Scoter (a life bird for both of them, but a bird I already

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had seen earlier in the year). After several hours of searching Ed and I did manage to add Black Duck, which luckily flew from Iowa into Nebraska.

My next bird for Nebraska did not come until after Christmas, when Mike Erickson, Paul Pearson, Ed, and I drove to Scottsbluff to see the Eurasian Wigeon (Code 5) that had been seen there on their Christmas Count. On 29 December Alice Kenitz led us to the bird, which was in the company of several hundred ducks and geese. The bird was quite wary, but I was able to get several photographs of it (*NBR* 55:19). The same day we drove to Sowbelly Canyon (Sioux Co.), where we saw our first Clark's Nutcrackers (Code 4) for Nebraska. We didn't see just one, we saw at least 40! We also had a flock of approximately 25 Bohemian Waxwings (Code 4) fly over. This was a species I had seen only once before in Nebraska. Despite several Goshawk reports around the area and a report of a Snowy Owl just north of Creighton, I was unable to find these birds and the Waxwings turned out to be the last new bird of the year. I ended 1986 with a Nebraska year list of 291 species.*

In summary, I found all of the 197 birds I had given a Code 1 and 53 of the 54 Code 2 species (missed Hermit Thrush). Of the 40 birds I had given a Code 3 I had found 26. The species that I missed in this group were: White-faced Ibis, Northern Goshawk, Black-necked Stilt, Common Moorhen, King Rail, Mountain Plover, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Cape May Warbler, Louisiana Waterthrush, Winter Wren, and Sharp-tailed Sparrow. With the exception of the Moorhen, I had reports of each of these species being in Nebraska in 1986. Included in my total were 12 Code 4 birds and 3 Code 5 species. Each species counted in the total had at least one witness or was documented with a photograph. I did not include the small loon species Ellen and I saw in Pierce Co. in November, as we were not sure of its identity. I do not believe it was a Common Loon, as it did not have the "jizz" of the species.

All in all, 1986 was a great year for birding and I had a fun time playing the game. One always thinks about the species he missed, but I know I'll remember for life some that I found. It was a year I learned a great deal about the birds of Nebraska, and about Nebraska as a whole. Perhaps the best part of birding in 1986 was making new acquaintances, spending time with old friends, and just sharing the joys and experiences that go with the sport.

I would like to thank the following for providing me with information and/or for acting as witnesses: Tanya Bray, Ed M. Brogie, Harrow Butcher, Isolde Cutshall, Roger Cutshall, Mike Erickson, Bill Huser, Alice Kenitz, Gary Lingle, John Lueshen, Willeta Lueshen, Eldon Marsh, Wayne Mollhoff, Barbara Padelford, Loren Padelford, Larry Roper, Richard Rosche, B. J. Rose, David Stage, and Bob Steinauer. I especially would like

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to thank my wife, Ellen, for her support and tolerance during the course of the year, although she has yet to ask me "Do you think it is possible to see 300 in one year in Nebraska?".

*ADDENDUM: Just recently, in going over photos I had taken in 1986, I came across several pictures of an immature tern I had taken at Willow Creek on 5 September. I remember the bird, questioning its identity, and photographing it before concluding it just must be another Forster's. Oops! The bird is clearly a Common Tern, based on the black horizontal line across the wing and the head pattern. This is a species I considered a Code 4 bird, based on the number of detailed records for the state and because of the identification problem. Nobody likes to admit botching an identification but this also proved to me the importance of keeping good records and taking photographs. Here, several years later I was able to identify a bird that up to this point I had

not thought I had seen in Nebraska and had missed
on my Nebraska Big year!

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